

KWAME NKRUMAH UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

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MPHIL ENGLISH

**TOPIC: THE VIRGIN AND THE WHORE: A PRESENTATION OF THE FEMALE IN  
NAWAL EL SAADAWI'S GOD DIES BY THE NILE, TWO WOMEN IN ONE AND  
WOMAN AT POINT ZERO AND HISHAM MATAR'S IN THE COUNTRY OF MEN.**

A thesis submitted to the Department of English, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy in English.

**BY**

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**JUNE, 2016**

## 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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## ABSTRACT

The female has been given various representations in literature over the years. These varying portrayals have been either positive or negative, or both. Two images of the female dominate literary works; females are either represented as ‘pure’ or ‘evil’ (fallen woman) and recently, as both pure and evil. Thus this dissertation seeks to analyse Nawal el Saadawi and Hisham Matar’s depiction of the virgin-whore dichotomy in their selected texts. The research focuses on discussing straightjacketing in the Maghreb Arab world and highlights the roles religion, culture and patriarchy play in maintaining the status quo between the male and the female. It also looks at what the female suffers in adhering to cultural and religious norms for femaleness and its effects on her psyche. It also discusses the lot of the female who rebels against these accepted norms. The study discusses how the virgin and whore images limit the female and result in her discontentment. Both images reduce her to a body that fulfils the roles prescribed for her under the respective class. However, the main focus of this thesis is not to solely identify female stereotypes in the chosen texts. Although the virgin-whore dichotomy in Arab literature plays an important part in this study, this study goes beyond just identifying stereotypes. It analyses the differences between male and female authors’ portrayal of this classification. Their stand will determine the negativity or positivity with which they portray women under both classifications. This study will show that the virgin image is an idealised one that leaves women discontented while both virgin and whore images make victims of women. It will show that these images limit women and reduce them to objects and do not give them room to express themselves freely.

For the purpose of this thesis, the selected texts will be analysed by applying feminist thoughts which relate to gender roles, stereotyping, culture and religion. These will help us understand the formation of gender roles and expose the role patriarchy plays in instituting sexual inequality. How the selected authors use literary devices such as realism, narrative technique, characterisation, flashback, conflict, dialogue and setting to depict the virgin-whore dichotomy in prose will also be studied. In order to holistically discuss the virgin-whore dichotomy, this research treats segregation, honour, veiling, female genital mutilation, education, marriage, motherhood, prostitution and physical and sexual abuse and their effects on the female. It then suggests ways of

enhancing the socialisation process to eliminate discrimination among the sexes and promote an understanding of the sexes so that both males and females can equally participate in the domestic and public spheres. This will help avoid the tendency of defining the female based on what is male and cause her to be viewed as an individual.



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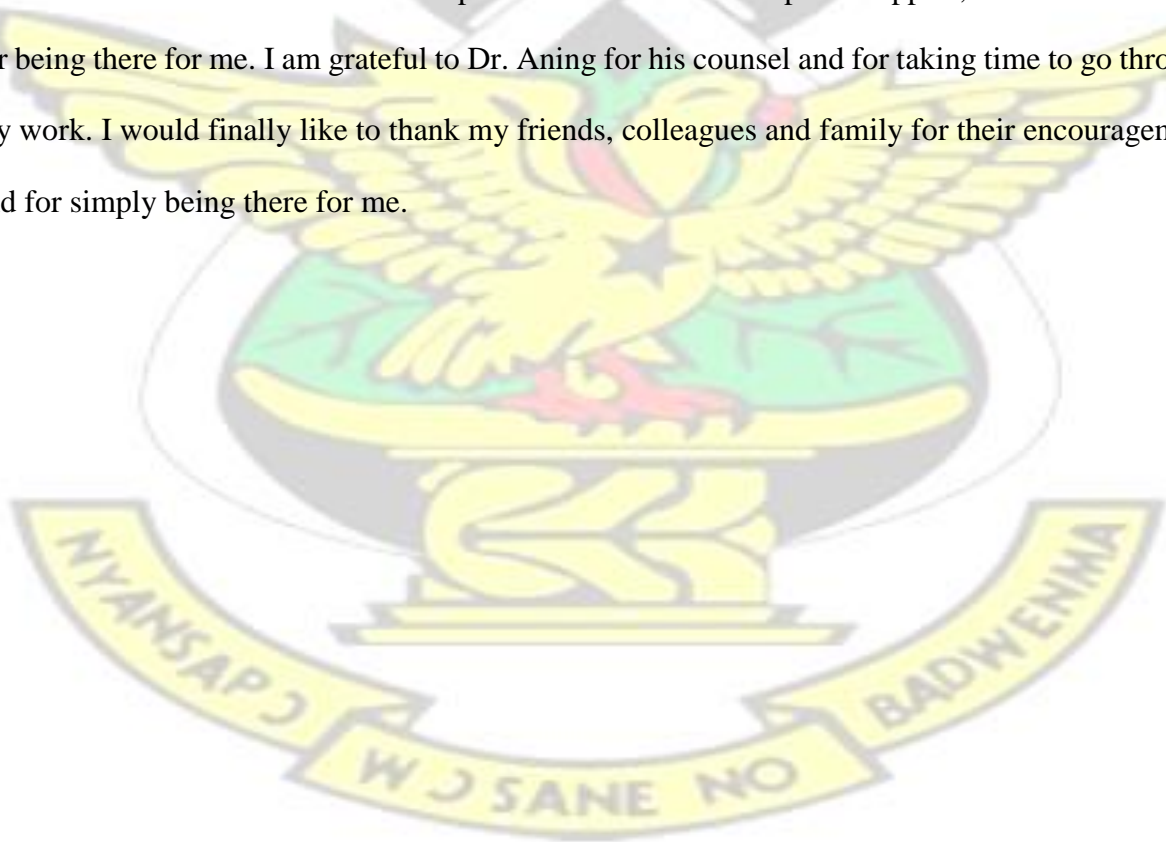
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## INTRODUCTION

The female has been given various representations in literature over the years. These varying portrayals have been either positive or negative, or both. The images of the female that have pervaded literature most are daughter, sister, wife, mother and prostitute. As a result of these representations two images of the female dominate literary works; females are either represented as ‘pure’ or ‘evil’ (fallen woman) and, recently, as both pure and evil. The ‘pure’ female character is the ideal while the ‘evil’ female is the rebellious and undesired archetype. The

‘virgin’ or ‘pure’ female is portrayed as a loving and devoted daughter, sister, wife or mother.

Virginia Woolf gives a good exposition on the ‘pure’ female character:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught, she sat in it - in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all – I need not say it – she was pure.<sup>1</sup>

This image can be traced in poetry, drama and prose. Out of this perception was coined the term ‘Angel in the House’ which represents the 19<sup>th</sup> century ideal woman. —The Victorian woman is the submissive wife whose whole excuse of being was to love, honour, obey and amuse her

Lord and master.<sup>2</sup> The dichotomy between the pure and fallen female still exists today. The ‘pure female’ represented by the ‘virgin’ image is the accepted archetype while the ‘fallen female’ represented by the ‘whore’ is the unacceptable female that must be rejected and punished. She is often ostracised from society, and isolated.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited by Pamela Makati in her paper —A Critical Study of Charles Dickens’ Representation of the Socially Disadvantaged Online. 4<sup>th</sup> September, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

In literature, with a few exceptions, the ‘\_virgin’ character is one that successfully performs the roles given her by her social status and patriarchy. She is passive, submissive and follows societal norms. She knows her position and does not threaten the instituted social order. The ‘\_evil’ or ‘\_fallen’ or ‘\_whore’ image of the female, on the other hand, threatens the very existence of societal norms and the whole human species. She is often considered an anomaly that must be dealt with because she does not accept the roles prescribed for her by her social status and by patriarchy. These two images of the female have been extensively used in literature and continue to be used across the globe.

The Arab society, which is predominately a patriarchal one, makes use of these images extensively. In Arab societies, it is very important for the female to know her place and stay within the perimeters allowed her by both religion and culture. Any violations of the rules are not taken lightly and are liable to punishment, even as severe as death. The world of the female consists of the domestic sphere. Her duties are to take care of the home, bear children and satisfy the desires of her husband. Her participation in public life or the polity is greatly limited and carefully scrutinised by her male relatives. The public sphere is limited to males; consequently the areas of politics, commerce and religion are male dominated and must not be trespassed by the female. Fatima Mernissi, in her book Beyond the Veil<sup>3</sup>, asserts that there are spatial boundaries in the Muslim society. She posits that the male is the master of the public sphere of the *umma*. The domestic universe of sexuality, as she calls it, although constituted by both sexes, the absence of the men who do not supposedly spend time in the domestic sphere makes it a woman’s world. She further states that when a woman trespasses into the *umma*, she wears a veil. Her intrusion is not taken

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<sup>3</sup> Mernissi, Fatima. Beyond the Veil: Male and Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1975.



lightly as she is seen as loose or immoral. Her theory partly explains the categorisation of females into the 'pure' and 'fallen' images. This theory will therefore be taken into consideration as we analyse the virgin-whore dichotomy in Arab literature and determine how Arab culture and religion aid categorisation. Importantly, we will discuss how the roles of women in the public sphere are viewed by their societies, for Mernissi (1975) holds that,

Women – who are citizens of this domestic universe and whose existence outside that sphere is considered an anomaly, a transgression – are subordinate to men, who (unlike their women) also possess a second nationality, one that grants them membership of the public sphere, the domain of religion and politics, the domain of power, of management of the affairs of the *umma*. (p.139)

In this vein el Saadawi, an Egyptian psychologist and feminist writer, agrees with Mernissi's position on the spheres created for men and women. Both writers agree that there exists a spatial boundary between the sexes; but el Saadawi posits that this boundary is as a result of the fear of the *fitna* (seductiveness) or power of the female. According to her, —the virtue of women had to be ensured if peace was to reign among men, not an easy task in view of the *fitna* (seductiveness) of women.<sup>4</sup> The perception of the female as an instrument of the devil has greatly shaped the

Muslim and the Arab world with regard to their opinion of females and how they treat them. Therefore this study discusses how the ideologies of spatial boundaries and the *fitna* of females have shaped both the positive and negative portrayals given the female as virgin and whore in Arab literature.

The fear of the *fitna* of females, perhaps, has influenced the whore label given some females. The female has been depicted as sisters, wives, mothers and prostitutes. These stereotypical images of

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<sup>4</sup> el Saadawi, Nawal. The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World. London: Zed books, 1980. p.203

females, Hartman<sup>5</sup> holds, have pervaded Arab literature. This does not change much even with more progressive authors who fight for the liberation of the female. In Naguib

Mahfouz's novel, The Thief and the Dogs,<sup>6</sup> he makes use of these two stereotypes:

...the two main female characters in al – Liss wa'l Kilab, Nabawiyya and Nur, both fit into this pattern of female stereotypes... play secondary roles and have less strong voices. This novel, for example, is concerned primarily with the male protagonist and though both female characters – Nur and Nabawiyya – are key to the plot development, Mahfouz spends little space expanding on or developing their characters. Nur is often present in the action of the text and speaks in her own voice in dialogue sections, but Nabawiyya is totally absent, has no voice of her own, and is only seen through descriptions, flashbacks, and interior monologues – all of which are filtered through the perceptions of the protagonist, Sa'id. (Hartman, p.7 – 8)

Nur who is a prostitute is given a voice in dialogue but not in monologue; therefore we are not given the opportunity to know her thoughts in order to know her better. On the other hand Nabawiyya the adulterous wife is not even given a voice to tell her side of the story. All we learn about her relationship with the protagonist is from him, a situation which does not help us to judge her fairly. Any judgement that is formed about these two female characters can therefore be false and, consequently, the story does not truly represent females as they are. However, he chooses this method of portrayal because of the image both women represent. They both represent the 'fallen woman' who is undesired and unacceptable.

Although there exists this divide between the virtuous and fallen woman (the prostitute), it is the portrayal of the female character as a prostitute that has pervaded modern Arab literature. According to el Saadawi, in a culture where the honour of a female is highly esteemed and

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<sup>5</sup> Hartman, Michelle. —Re-reading women in/to Naguib Mahfouz's al – Liss wa'l kilab (The Thief and the Dogs).|| Research in African Literatures: Arabic Writing in Africa. Vol. 28, No. 3. Fall 1997. P.7-13.

<sup>6</sup> Mahfouz, Naguib. Al-Liss Wa'l Kilab. Egypt: Maktabat Msr, 1961.

dependent on her sexual relations with men, it is rather interesting —...that the woman prostitute plays a much more important role in Arabic literature than that which is accorded to the pure and virtuous woman... The prostitute seems to symbolise real woman, woman without a veil or a mask.<sup>7</sup>

This accounts for the extensive use of the image of the female as a prostitute, for only she has the courage to question man. Consequently, we will study how both male and female authors depict the female character as pure and fallen in order to conclude whether there is any difference in the kind of representations given to her.

### **THESIS STATEMENT**

The female has been categorised into the classes of the virgin and whore. These stereotypical images of the female have been repeatedly used to depict the female in literature. We analyse the virgin-whore dichotomy to depict how shallow and limiting it is. We also discuss what causes the female to rebel and how literary devices are used to represent the female situation in prose.

### **OBJECTIVES**

Furthermore, the objective of this thesis is to study how the authors portray the female as virgin and whore in Arab literature, and determine the implications and realities of this categorisation (on females). We will also discuss the attitude of the writers towards their portrayals of the female. This study will also briefly look at how the representation of females as virgin and whore in Arab

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<sup>7</sup> el Saadawi, 1980.



literature differs from that of Western representation. We will analyse how the female situation is depicted in prose by use of plot, setting, narrative technique, language and realism.

## METHODOLOGY

Our study is, however, limited to Maghreb Arab writers from Egypt and Libya although other Arab writers will be referred to in order to support the study. References to polemic texts will only be made to throw more light on the thesis. The thesis will holistically discuss Nawal el Saadawi's God Dies by the Nile<sup>8</sup>, Two Women in One<sup>9</sup> and Woman at Point Zero<sup>10</sup> and Hisham Matar's In the Country of Men.<sup>11</sup> These novels have been chosen because they depict the virginwhore dichotomy and realistically represent the female situation in the Arab world. The novels serve as our primary source of research material, while polemic texts by both Arab and non-Arab authors will serve as our secondary sources. Other texts will be used only in as much as they throw more light on our discussions. Only translated versions of the novels will be used in this study.

Much research has been carried out since the dawn of feminism on stereotypical images of females in male authored texts to depict the unfairness of their representations of females and to also debunk these. This gave rise to the surge of female writers who took the pen to recreate and tell the feminine side of history as well as create female characters as they ought to be. Elaine Showalter in her paper —The Feminine Poetics<sup>12</sup> calls on researchers to move beyond

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<sup>8</sup> el Saadawi, Nawal. God Dies by the Nile. London: Zed Books, 1985.

<sup>9</sup> ---, Two Women in One. Washington: The Seal Press, 1986.

<sup>10</sup> ---, Woman at Point Zero. London: Zed Books, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Matar, Hisham. In the Country of Men. New York: Dial Press, 2008

<sup>12</sup> Showalter, Elaine. —Towards a Feminine Poetics. Women's Writing about Women. London: Croom Helm, 1979.



identifying female stereotypes in literature. Therefore the main focus of this thesis is not to solely identify female stereotypes in the chosen texts. It will show that these images limit women and reduce them to objects and do not give them room to express themselves freely.

## **JUSTIFICATION/RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY**

Feminism has become a very important aspect of literary criticism. Thus, an examination of Arab novels and their depictions of females from the feminist perspective are important to this study. An understanding of how their representation largely reflects the situation of many females will help in forging a way forward as it will force readers to see things as they really are. Also this thesis, going beyond the identification of stereotypes, will help students and critics to go beyond identifying stereotypes and delve into what lies behind the stereotyping of females within the framework of feminism. It will make researchers do a more purposeful study of texts, so that the outcome of their work makes for a better understanding of the human condition. It should also be a meaningful contribution to the fight against all forms of discrimination. This research has the potential of enhancing our socialisation process and cause the female to be seen as an individual with a voice, mind and rights. This will make her to be defined not based on what is male. It will also highlight the consequences of female genital mutilation and forced and child marriages so that society can be better informed to institute mechanisms to curb these practices or reduce their occurrence. But more importantly, writers could be encouraged to produce works that would more adequately reflect the thoughts, the aspirations and the functions of both females and males in human society.

## **STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS**

The thesis will be divided into four chapters. Chapter One focuses on literature review. Under literature review, we will discuss researches already available on the topic of study and discuss how this thesis differs from them. The theoretical framework will also be presented in this chapter. Then in Chapter Two we will discuss the representation of the female as a virgin. The —virginll, according to Arab perception, is not only a submissive female but one who is a virgin biologically; that is one who keeps her hymen intact until marriage. She also has limited contact with males, and associates only with her father and brothers before marriage. We will, as a result, discuss how the various authors treat the image of the virgin. The third chapter will discuss the representation of the female as whore. The whore is either a woman who intrudes into the domain of the male or one who actually practises prostitution as a trade. The final chapter will give a critical analysis of the findings in chapters two and three. The analysis will consider how these images still persist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It will also focus on highlighting the findings from the discussion and the effects of such categorisation on females. We will also suggest a way forward so that both males and females can equally participate in the domestic and public spheres. Then, in the conclusion we will highlight our major findings and the attitude of the writers in their portrayal of the female.

## BACKGROUND STUDY

Two stereotypical images of the female dominate written and oral literature. The female is mainly represented either as pure or evil in literature. These portrayals of the female have been criticised by feminists and scholars who hold that these depictions are not accurate. Some argue that the representations given to females, especially by male authors, are just reflections of their perceptions about femaleness. Critics blame patriarchy for its role in stereotyping women in the bid to rule and subjugate them. Research has shown that the categorisation of females into the classes of 'Pure' or 'Virgin' and 'Evil' or 'Whore' stems out of a distortion of the JudeoChristian teachings on females. Researchers have concluded that these two archetypes stem out of the images represented by Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Eve who caused Adam to disobey

God. Mary, mother of Jesus, is considered to be pure and one who excels in family life while Eve is blamed for the fall of humankind. She represents fallen womanhood. This categorisation of females into two groups does not leave room for anyone to stand in between; you are either a virgin or a whore.

The 'virgin' or 'pure' female is usually portrayed as a loving and devoted mother, wife, sister or daughter. She respects the authority of males and is a good homemaker. Evelyn Accad observes that in the Arab world, females are —...born to fill the roles of daughter, wife, and mother, to be successively subservient to their fathers, husbands, and sons.<sup>13</sup> The 'evil' or 'whore', on the other hand, is neither loving nor devoted; she does not submit to patriarchy. She refuses to be controlled or ruled by anyone but herself. A feminist and psychologist, Nawal el Saadawi, holds that the

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<sup>13</sup> Accad, Evelyn. —Assia Djébar's Contribution to Arab Women's Literature: Rebellion, Maturity, Vision. May, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40152307>.



categorisation of females into the class of virgin or whore in the Arab world was borne out of the introduction of patriarchy and capitalist systems. —For the last five or six thousand years man has put all his capabilities and imagination into inventing a wide variety of bounds with which to encircle and pin down women.<sup>14</sup> She further asserts that before the introduction of private ownership of property, women had as much freedom as men. The introduction of private ownership of property stripped the female of all her rights as an individual. This and other factors led to stereotyping of the female in the bid to rule and subjugate her.<sup>15</sup>

While the virgin-whore dichotomy has evolved out of a distortion of Judeo-Christian teaching on women in the West, it is the misinterpretation of Islam's story of creation that has greatly influenced Arab perception of females. The female, as a result of this misinterpretation, is seen as evil. Eve is classified as evil because she tempted Adam to sin. This picture of Eve causing man to sin is extended to all females and therefore the attempt to segregate and veil her in the Arab world. El Saadawi observes that the segregation and veiling imposed on women is as a result of the fear of males of the innate power women possess. Males are afraid of females and therefore impose these laws on them to protect themselves; —Segregation and veiling were not meant to ensure the protection of women, but essentially that of men. And the Arab woman was not imprisoned in the home to safeguard her body, her honour and her morals, but rather to keep intact the honour and morals of men.<sup>15</sup> This fear of the power of females, she posits, is because of her *fitna* (seductiveness). It is believed that Eve seduced Adam into eating the forbidden fruit. Consequently, Eve is seen as an instrument of the devil and so all women are regarded as the devil's vessels; —the myth of Adam and Eve is the story of man's fear of woman... attributing

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<sup>14</sup> el Saadawi, Nawal. The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World. London: Zed books, 1980.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 230

<sup>15</sup> el Saadawi, 1980. p.151



evil, sin and devilry to Eve.<sup>16</sup> This perception has greatly shaped the Muslim and the Arab world's view of females and how it treats them. From this ideology stems what Fatima Mernissi (1975), a Moroccan sociologist, terms spatial boundary in the Arab world. She affirms el Saadawi's assertion by stating that Arab societies are divided into two.

Hence, the virgin or pure female is the one that knows her place and stays within the boundaries prescribed for her by religion and patriarchy. She stays home and wears the veil and ensures that she is well covered up before intruding into the *umma*. In other words, she succumbs to segregation, veiling, and takes precaution that her seductiveness is not seen by men. The pure or virgin female is the accepted archetype both in real life and in literature. According to el Saadawi, —The ideal woman in novels is still the beautiful, quietly angelic and obedient female, who does not show any particular boldness or ambition. The perfect woman is as pure, and as sweet, and as perfectly unassuming, as she ever was.<sup>17</sup> Her goal is to serve her father and her brothers, and then her husband and children when she gets married. This portrayal of the female abounds in Arab literature. She is taught about what is considered feminine by her mother at a young age.

Although the outlined characteristics of the pure female bear similarities with past Western representations of the female, there is another facet that Western representations did not use. In

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.231

<sup>17</sup> el Saadawi. p. 246

Arab society, even though a female may be virtuous, she will be killed if she is discovered not to be a virgin, biologically, at marriage.

Arab society still considers that the fine membrane which covers the aperture of the external genital organs is the most cherished and most important part of a girl's body, and is much more valuable than one of her eyes, or an arm, or a lower limb. An Arab family does not grieve as much at the loss of a girl's eye as it does if she happens to lose her virginity. In fact if the girl lost her life, it would be considered less of a catastrophe than if she lost her hymen.<sup>18</sup>

The high regard given to the hymen of a girl is as a result of the honour it brings a family.

Family status is largely dependent upon its honor, much of which is determined by the respectability of its daughters, who can damage it irreparably by the perceived misuse of their sexuality... A woman's virginity is the property of the men around her, first her father, later a gift for her husband; a virtual dowry as she graduates to marriage. In this context, a woman's 'ard (honor) is a commodity which must be guarded by a network of family and community members. The woman is guarded externally by her behavior and dress code and internally by keeping her hymen intact.<sup>20</sup>

The pure female archetype, according to Arab perception, is not only a passive, weak and submissive female but one who has no sexual relations with a man before marriage. She also has limited contact with males and associates only with male relatives before marriage. Her virginity ensures the honour of her family and her lack of sexual knowledge preserves society. On the first night of her marriage, it is a custom for her husband to prove her a virgin; —...the rituals of marriage require that defloration be performed by the husband with his finger and that \_red blood be shed on the white sheet' (el Saadawi, p.43). Defloration can also be through sexual intercourse. El Saadawi, in her novel Two Women in One,<sup>19</sup> describes how a family inspects the sheets of a newlywed in search of blood to prove the family's honour;

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.40  
<sup>20</sup>

Ruggi, Suzanne. —Commodifying Honor in Female Sexuality: Honor Killings in Palestine. In Power and Sexuality in the Middle East. Middle East Report, No. 206. Spring, 1998, pp. 12-15 Published by: Middle East Research and Information Project. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3012473>

<sup>19</sup> el Saadawi, Nawal. Two Women in One. Washington: The Seal Press, 1986.

...it was now the \_day after'... her father would come looking for blood, her mother would inspect the sheets and nightdresses, and members of the family would be all over the newlyweds' house searching... for the family's... honour. (p.103)

If there is no blood after defloration, in order to protect a family's honour, the girl in some cases is killed either by her father, brother or uncle.<sup>20</sup> According to Lama Abu-Odeh, a professor of law,

Arab women, according to the ideal model, are expected to abstain from any kind of sexual practice before they get married.... The wedding night, therefore, bears phenomenal importance for Arab women, since it is that crucial time when society is about to make a judgment on their propriety. Some honor crimes are known to occur precisely then, when a woman's failure to bleed as a result of penetration to break her hymen, is taken to have failed the social test. In this classic scenario, she is —taken back by the groom and his family to her own family, who in turn might kill her for having shamed them. Only her bleeding in death can erase the shame brought about by her failure to bleed in sex on her wedding night.<sup>21</sup>

These murders are termed \_honour killings.' In most Arab countries the culprits who commit this crime are not prosecuted and even if they are, they might escape punishment. Abu-Odeh further gives other circumstances under which a female might be killed in the name of defending a family's honour:

Killing a woman because she fails to bleed on her wedding night is only one possible scenario for an honor killing. Honor/shame-based heterosexuality usually requires —less as evidence of failure in performance. In certain rural localities, a woman might suffer the violence of honor if she is spotted conversing with a man behind a fence, or, in lower-class urban neighborhoods, if she is seen leaving the car of a strange man. In both these instances, the woman is seen as having —jeopardized not her vaginal hymen, but her physical and social one. She moved with a body and in a space where she was not supposed to be.<sup>24</sup>

The female body is therefore represented by the hymen; in other words, she becomes the hymen. She guards her social and physical hymen by dressing appropriately and staying within the confines prescribed for her by religion and patriarchy. If she oversteps this spatial boundary, she

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<sup>20</sup> el Saadawi, 1980. p.152

<sup>21</sup> Abu-Odeh, Lama. —Crimes of Honor and the Construction of Gender in Arab Societies. | American Journal of Comparative Law. Vol. 58, Issue 4, Fall 2010. <http://comparativelaw.metapress.com/content/14x33611j8477734/>

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 922



falls into the category of the fallen woman or whore who must be gotten rid of. The female is subjected to veiling, keeping her hymen intact until marriage and forced to undergo female genital mutilation to ensure male domination. The veil just like the hymen serves as a membrane that covers the female's sexuality. The female body becomes like clay that is moulded to suit the desires of the male. The male through patriarchy acts as the potter who moulds the female (the clay) consequently traditional femaleness is a creation of patriarchy not God.

The high regard of Arabs and Sub-Saharan Africans for the biological virginity of a female has led to the institution of cultural practices such as female genital mutilation. This is to ensure that a girl keeps her hymen intact before marriage and stays faithful to her husband after marriage. —It is believed to purify women and control their sexuality, making them more docile and obedient. Women who remain uncut are disrespected, considered promiscuous, and may become social outcasts (Crawford, 2006). Despite its harmful effects on women this cultural practice still continues to be practised in the northern part of Ghana and in over 30 countries in Africa, South Asia and the Middle East.<sup>22</sup> However governments in most African nations have put laws into place that make female genital mutilation a serious crime. Punishment for this crime ranges from fines, three months imprisonment to life imprisonment.<sup>23</sup>

To sum up, the pure female archetype is both submissive and chaste. However, it is pertinent to note that although men perform these honour killings, their honour is not dependent on their own

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<sup>22</sup> Rahman, Anika and Nahid Toubia. Female Genital Mutilation: A Guide to Laws and Policies Worldwide. London: Zed Books, 1988.

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.reproductiverights.org/document/female-genital-mutilation-fgm-legal-prohibitions-worldwide>  
24/02/16



actions but rather on that of their female relatives. Therefore a man may be very immoral and promiscuous but be considered an honourable man because of the chastity of his female relatives. However, his failure to protect the honour of his family, that is to keep female relatives in check, makes him a woman in the eyes of society.

On the other hand, the whore female archetype is the opposite of everything the pure female represents. She does not submit willingly to patriarchy and does not stay home or within the confines prescribed for her by society due to her social status and religion. She does not exude weakness but power, and acknowledges her seductiveness. She is a representation of Eve. She is the unaccepted archetype that must be rejected and punished. She intrudes into the *umma* without observing the necessary precautions. A woman is called a whore either for simply intruding into the sphere of the *umma* or showing qualities and temperaments that are not considered feminine or are dangerous in a female. She can also be someone who plies the trade of prostitution. Tsitsi Dangarembga in her novel, Nervous Conditions,<sup>24</sup> gives a definition of what kind of women society considers whores. —I don't know what people mean by a loose woman – sometimes she is someone who walks the streets, sometimes she is an educated woman, sometimes she is a successful man's daughter or simply beautiful....‖ Therefore the fallen female is one that does not kowtow to the systems set up in society. She acknowledges her *fitna* and is neither passive nor docile.

A... strong woman is necessarily an abnormal person or a freak of nature, merits vilification or hatred, or at least a measure of criticism and sarcasm.... Thus it is that strength and character in women were considered an irrefutable evidence of evil, deceit, hypocrisy, cunning, obscure designs, readiness to do harm, satanic attraction and seductiveness, sorcery and devilry.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Dangarembga, Tsitsi. Nervous Conditions. Oxfordshire: Ayebia, 1988.

<sup>25</sup> el Saadawi, 1980. p. 233

It is her knowledge of the power she possesses as a woman that scares males. In the West females were subjugated and portrayed as weak and having little intellectual capacity. However, in the Arab world, she is subjugated and segregated because she is —...the embodiment of destruction, the symbol of disorder. The woman is *fitna*, the epitome of the uncontrollable, a living representative of dangers of sexuality and its rampant disruptive potential.<sup>26</sup> The resultant outcome is that the Muslim social structure controls and curtails this disruptive power of the female. Thus women are

...used for the specific purpose of providing the Muslim nation with offspring and quenching the tensions of sexual instinct. But in no way should women be an object of emotional investment or the focus of attention, which should be devoted to Allah alone in the form of knowledge-seeking, meditation, and prayer.<sup>27</sup>

She is reduced to performing these roles both culturally and religiously. Any role contrary to these is considered very dangerous as it threatens the very existence of society and religion. It is her ability to render the male species powerless that makes her segregation necessary.

The Muslim woman is endowed with a fatal attraction which erodes the male's will to resist her and reduces him to a passive acquiescent role. He has no choice; he can only give into the attraction, hence her identification with *fitna*, chaos, and with anti-divine and anti-social forces of the universe.<sup>28</sup>

Based on Mernissi's submission, it is clear why the female must strictly obey the rules of spatial boundary set up by religion and society. As a result, the whole female archetype must be punished and even killed to protect males and ensure that they perform their religious duties. She must be

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<sup>26</sup> Mernissi, 1975. p.44

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.45.

<sup>28</sup> Mernissi, p. 41.

ostracised or killed because even Mohammed could not escape her powers. Some comments by Mohammed ingrain this into the psyche of Muslim males.

The prophet saw a woman. He hurried home to have intercourse with his wife Zaynab, then left the house and said, *‘When the woman comes towards you, it is Satan who is approaching you. When one of you sees a woman and is attracted to her, he should hurry home to his wife. It would be the same as the other one.’*<sup>29</sup> [Italics mine]

The woman’s attractiveness and —...*qaid* power (‘the power to deceive and defeat men, not by force, but by cunning and intrigue’)<sup>30</sup> is equated to that of Satan. Thus only her annihilation can release the male to perform his religious duties freely. Religion as well as culture plays an important role in categorising and subjugating women. The Islamic notions of the danger of the female has resulted in segregation and veiling being imposed on women. Even two women’s words equal that of one man. This clearly serves to encourage sexual inequality and its consequent prejudices and abuse. Mernissi (1975) asserts that

Sexual equality violates Islam’s premise, actualized in its laws, that heterosexual love is dangerous to Allah’s order. Muslim marriage is based on male dominance. The desegregation of the sexes violates Islam’s ideology on women’s position in the social order: that a woman should be under the authority of fathers, brothers, or husbands. Since women are considered by Allah to be destructive element, they are spatially confined and excluded from matters other than those of the family. Female access to non-domestic space is put under the control of males. (p.19)

Although there exists this divide between the virtuous and fallen woman (whore), it is the portrayal of the female character as a prostitute that has pervaded modern Arab literature. According to el Saadawi (1980), though the honour of a female is highly esteemed and dependent on her sexual relations with men,

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<sup>29</sup> Surah cited by Mernissi, 1975. p.41

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.33



It is rather ironic, then, that the woman prostitute plays a much more important role in Arabic literature than that which is accorded to be pure and virtuous woman. It is as though purity and virtue are not attractive enough to evoke interest. The prostitute seems to symbolise real woman, woman without a veil or a mask. She is real woman because she has lifted her mask of deceit from her face and no longer feels any need to pretend that she is in love, or simulate virtue and devotion. (p.247)

She has the power to confront man and perhaps, as el Saadawi and Mernissi assert, to make him lose all reasoning and do her bidding as Eve is believed to have done.

Having dealt with what is considered the virgin and whore archetypes of the female, we will now discuss the varying portrayals given to Arab women both in history and in literature. The female has been given different depictions in these two fields although these portrayals overlap. They overlap because the prevailing ideas or schools of thought of a time greatly influence writers and the kind of images they depict. According to Naguib Mahfouz, —There is no escape from public life. The writer does not live in isolation, he is a citizen... The writer has to follow his conscience whatever the price. Creativity does not accept half measures.<sup>31</sup> Arabian history before and during the early periods of Islam portrayed females as having as much liberty as their male counterparts. They were free to choose their husbands, divorce and participate in politics as well as religion. Females played very important roles and occupied prominent places —...in literature, culture, the arts, love, sex, and in the social and economic life of their people. There were even women who became famous for their active, important participation in political struggles, wars and well-known battles.<sup>32</sup> Al-Khansa is one such woman. She was well known for the elegy in 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabian poetry. An

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<sup>31</sup> Al-Ghitani, Gamal. The Mahfouz Dialogs. Trans. Humphrey Davies. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> el Saadawi, 1980. p.187



...anecdote says that al-Nabigha told al-Khansa 'If Abu Basir had not already recited to me, I would have said that you are the greatest poet of the Arabs. Go, for you are the greatest poet among those with breasts.' Al-Khansa replied, 'I'm the greatest poet among those with testicles, too.'<sup>33</sup>

There are also other poetesses like Wallada bint al-Musiakfi and Nazhūn bint al-Qala'ī who defied all odds and attacked male poets fearlessly.<sup>34</sup> There were women who fought either with or against the prophet Mohammed in battles. Hind Bint Rabia is cited as an example by el Saadawi (1980). She fought against Mohammed with her tribe; —Hind was an Arab woman who insisted on her freedom and on making her own decisions in personal life... Hind was well known for her logic and quick-wittedness, even in answering the prophet (p.188). Together with her army, they victoriously defeated the Muslims in the battle of Ahad. El Saadawi observes that, that is why women warriors in literature are not portrayed as Muslims. Another example is Mohammed's first wife Khadija. She lived her life as a successful business woman, freely mixing with males and, although fifteen years older than Mohammed who was at the time her accountant, she cajoles him to marry her. It must be noted that although there are many examples of women who occupied influential positions, this does not cut across for all females, or represent the whole picture of the status of females at the time in all Arab communities. For example, —Women in desert areas and oases enjoyed a greater degree of liberty than women in the towns because they were involved in obtaining the means of livelihood. These women mixed freely with men and did not carry the veil.<sup>35</sup> An additional factor that some scholars use to prove the high status of women during the pre-Islamic era is the worship of female goddesses.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> —Al-Khansa. 12<sup>th</sup> June, 2013. [http:// en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Khansa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Khansa).

<sup>34</sup> Schippers, Arie —The Role of Women in Medieval Andalusian Arabic Story-Telling. *Arabic Literature in Western Research*. 1993. p.139-152

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 189

<sup>36</sup> el Saadawi, 1985 and Lerner, Gerda. —The Origin of Prostitution in Ancient Mesopotamia. *Signs*. Vol. 11, No. 2 (Winter, 1986), pp. 236-254

Gay Robins writing on ancient Egyptian women says:

The main roles of Egyptian women were to bear children, to run the household and manage its economy, to help accumulate wealth through the exchange of surplus goods (often of their own production), to weave textiles which were fundamental for clothing, and to produce flour and bread basic to the Egyptian diet.<sup>37</sup>

Women clearly played an active part in both domestic and public spheres. Their roles went beyond being daughters, wives and mothers. Research on ancient Egypt reveals that women enjoyed much liberty and were involved in all spheres of rule. According to Hunt Norman Bancroft in Living in Ancient Egypt,<sup>38</sup> women could own land, manage their estate and represent themselves in court. They were seen as equal to men under the law and were given the same treatment as men. Amelia Blandford Edwards gives a good exposition on the important positions occupied by women in ancient Egypt and the authority they exercised in social and governance matters. Females inherited and owned property and traded with the state. Husbands were known to bestow their property on their wives upon marriage.<sup>39</sup> Women also held the highest office in the land, that is reigning as Pharaohs. Researchers cite the following females who possibly reigned as pharaohs although for some of them there are no conclusive evidence to prove their reign: Nitocris (Sixth dynasty of Egypt), Sobekneferu (Twelfth dynasty of Egypt), Hatsepsut (Eighteenth dynasty of Egypt), Neferneferuaten (Eighteenth dynasty of Egypt), and Twosret (Nineteenth dynasty of Egypt).<sup>40</sup> It is believed that these women during their reigns were accorded all the honour due male pharaohs. El Saadawi (1980) names two queens who reigned as pharaohs

Famous queens took over and reigned supreme during the XVIIIth dynast.  
For example Nephertiti, and Hatchipsot who is well known for her

<sup>37</sup> Robins, Gay. Women in Ancient Egypt Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

<sup>38</sup> Hunt, Norman Bancroft. Living in Ancient Egypt. New York: Thalamus Publishing, 2009.

<sup>39</sup> Edwards, Amelia Blandford and Patricia O'Neill. —The Social and Political Position of Woman in Ancient Egypt. PMLA. Vol. 120, No. 3 May, 2005. pp. 843-857 URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25486220>.

<sup>40</sup> —Women in Ancient Egypt. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women\_in\_Ancient\_Egypt. 14<sup>th</sup> June, 2013.

powerful personality and her reign which lasted 22 years (1504-1483BC). Hatchipsot's statue was sculptured in the form of a sphinx, with a human head and a lion's body as a symbol of strength of mind and physique. Her reign was characterized by prosperity and progress. She proved her qualities as a ruler and a queen.... (p.161-62)

There are other prominent women like the wives of some pharaohs who played significant political and diplomatic roles in Egypt. They also actively participated in religion;

There is historic evidence of religious leadership by royal women. Two of these were Queen Baranamtarra (ca. 2350 B.C.) and her successor Queen Shagshag of Lagash. Both were the wives of kings and as such were in charge of the economic administration of the temple of the goddess Bau, as the king was in charge of the temple of the chief male god.<sup>41</sup>

However, these images of the female are barely captured in fiction. The images that are commonly represented are women who are weak and submissive or evil.

The image drawn of women by Arab writers and poets in more ancient times, but also in contemporary literature, does not differ except in details from that which has been depicted in the West. Whatever differences exist are mainly due to changes in place and time, or some writers being more forward-looking than others.<sup>42</sup>

It is apparent that although women enjoyed special places in history, this is not captured in literature. Ancient Arab literature portrays women as frivolous, capricious, and rarely trustworthy. Writers who hold that women are passive and are to submit to men to keep them happy, depict women as such in their texts. Those who view her as a vessel easily used by the devil, and were consequently afraid of the innate power of woman, portrayed her as evil. Abbas al-Akkad is of the former perception and writers like Taufiq al-Hakim and Ibn Mokafa'a hold the latter position. These authors depict the woman as pure or whore, respectively. Taufiq al-Hakim is perceived as a misogynist and represents women as fickle and untrustworthy in some of his texts. These are

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<sup>41</sup> Lerner, p.239.

<sup>42</sup> el Saadawi, 1980. p.230



evident in his works like Ahl al-kahf (The People of the Cave) and Rihlatun ilalghad (Journey into the Future).

Another Egyptian male writer who does not deviate much from the representations given women is Naguib Mahfouz. He employs the stereotypical images of the woman. She is portrayed as either the virgin or whore. These images of the woman are recurrent in most of his works. In novels like the Cairo Trilogy, The Thief and the Dogs, Autumn Quail, Midaq Alley and others, he uses the two categories of female characters. According to Hartman

The female stereotypes employed in the novel are specific characterisations that are frequently applied to women. The two main categories are the loving and devoted wife/ mother/ sister, and the —fallen woman‡, the prostitute... The dichotomy that has evolved is the divide between the virgin and the whore. One is pure and virtuous, the other dirty and disreputable.<sup>43</sup>

Despite the low regard and ‘evil’ depictions given females in both ancient and modern Arab literature, there is a female character that cuts across borders in the East. Although the origin of her story cannot be determined, she plays an important part in Arabian and, recently, Western literature. Scheherazade is the female protagonist of the tale of A Thousand and One Nights, widely translated as Arabian Nights. She is portrayed as a woman who saves her life and that of other virgins from king Shahryahar. King Shahryahar, after being betrayed by his wife, (she has affairs with black male slaves who disguise themselves dressed as women) kills her and decides to marry only virgins who he kills at dawn after the night of their defloration. Scheherazade coaxes her father to allow her to marry Shahryahar while devising a plan to save herself and the other virgins. After their marriage, she changes the paranoid king through her tales. For one thousand and one

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<sup>43</sup> Hartman, Michelle. —Re-reading women in/to Naguib Mahfouz’s al – Liss wa’l kilab (The Thief and the Dogs).‡ Research in African Literatures: Arabic Writing in Africa. Vol. 28, No. 3. Fall 1997. p.7-13.



nights she spins tales and recites them to the king. While performing the role of a storyteller, she also bears him three sons during this time. At the end she begs the king to spare her life because of their sons. Her life is spared but the king admits that he would have spared her life without her asking.

To some critics Scheherazade represents the first empowered female and shows how women can liberate themselves through knowledge, and without recourse to violence. Muhsin Jassim Ali asserts that —Unlike other unlucky females, Scheherazade draws upon her knowledge and wit... It is Scheherazade's art to be sure, which saves her life.¶<sup>44</sup> However, other feminists take a different stance. They hold that an in-depth analysis of Scheherazade puts her in the class of the virgin archetype. She is placed under this category because she gets married as a virgin, stays faithful to her husband and bears him sons. Perhaps her life would not have been spared had she borne daughters. Her role as a mother of sons greatly ensures her survival. She fits the first two out of three traditional roles Luce Irigaray observes that women throughout history have occupied;

Mother, virgin, prostitute: these are the social roles imposed on women. The characteristics of (so called) feminine sexuality derive from them: the valorization of reproduction and nursing; faithfulness; modesty, ignorance of and even lack of interest in sexual pleasure; a passive acceptance of men's \_activity'...<sup>45</sup>

In view of the foregoing discussion on A Thousand and One Nights, it is important to state that Western versions of Scheherazade are quite different from the Eastern one. In most Western translations of the tales, be it French or English, she has been depicted as one whose life was spared by Shahrayar by virtue of her seductive sexuality and not by her intelligence. Mernissi in

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<sup>44</sup> Muhsin Jassim Ali. Scheherazade in England. Washington DC: Three Continents Press, 1981. p.3

<sup>45</sup> Irigaray, Lucy. This Sex which is not. Trans. Catherine Porter. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985. p. 186-87

Scheherazade goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems,<sup>46</sup> discusses these varying representations given Scheherazade in the East and West. According to her, —the intellectual Scheherazade was lost... apparently because the Westerners were only interested in two things: adventure and sex|| (p. 62).

Also, there are other female characters in A Thousand and One Night. El Saadawi gives an exposition on this:

Woman is at her best and most powerful when she takes on the form of a genie or spirit in A Thousand and One Night. Men fall victim to her beauty and her spells, and go through great suffering and even torture to gain her favours.

The woman spirit or genie occupies a prominent place in these tales which indicates that the power and strength of women remained an idea and a feeling deeply ingrained in the mind and emotions of the Arab peoples, and continued to be linked with the supernatural powers of genies, devils, sorcery, fitna and sex.<sup>47</sup>

In conclusion, although women have played and continue to play important roles in history in varying capacities, history, until recent centuries, has kept them hidden and their efforts have not been recognized. Although they are now given recognition for their efforts and their status highly raised across the globe, some women are still subjugated and abused while various reasons have been given for their inferiority and weakness to maintain the sexual inequality status-quo.

The secondary roles given women by patriarchy are supported by both culture and religion in the East and the West. The female is limited to performing the roles of mother, sister, daughter and

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<sup>46</sup> Mernissi, Fatima. Scheherazade goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems. 2001

<sup>47</sup> el Saadawi, 1980. p. 239-40

wife. Her involvement in both religion and politics is restricted and critically watched in the Arab world. She has divinely been declared as evil<sup>48</sup> and must therefore be dealt with brutally if she does not heed the *divine* sanctions of segregation and veiling. To further ensure her subjugation, she has been categorised into two classes: the virgin and whore. In both categories, her body has been made an object. Cultural and religious practices such as female genital mutilation, honour killings, veiling and segregation are to ensure that she stays within the confines of the domestic sphere. These are also to guarantee that she stays in the class of the virgin which is the acceptable female archetype sanctioned by society and religion. The whore archetype is hated by society and as such all females are socialised not to fall into this class. Although the whore image appears to give women freedom to be themselves, it inevitably limits them as well.

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<sup>48</sup> Prophet Mohammed remarks that —When the woman comes towards you, it is Satan who is approaching you! and —After my disappearance there will be no greater source of chaos and disorder for my nation than women. (Mernissi, 1975: p.41, 43).

## Chapter One

### Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

#### Literature Review

The virgin-whore dichotomy is of much interest to feminists. It transcends literature and can be found within most cultures in the world. This image of the virgin and whore is argued to have placed the female in a straightjacket thus greatly restricting her freedom of choice. This is because she is forced either to perform the roles assigned to the virgin or the whore but not both, as both images are seen as oppositional and therefore cannot co-exist together. This is especially the case of the female in the Arab world depicted by some authors. During the early stages of feminism (1880-1920), much research was committed to identifying stereotypical images of the female in male authored texts. Female writers pointed out the inability of male authors to depict the reality of the female experience. They attributed this failure to the males' inability to comprehend the female, and their prejudicial perceptions about femaleness. This is however preceded by the rise of women and some men in defence of the rights of the female in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. They advocated for greater liberty and access to education as well as equality of the female with the male. Thus female writers consciously sought to write to depict the female situation from the point of view of the female. This is highlighted in Elaine

Showalter's —Towards a Feminist Poetics.<sup>49</sup> The interest in the identification of stereotypical images of the female in literature has greatly informed feminist thought.

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<sup>49</sup> Showalter, Elaine. —Towards a Feminine Poetics. In Women's Writing about Women. London: Croom Helm, 1979



Realism in fiction also brought to the fore interest in the virgin-whore dichotomy in the nineteenth century. Studies in this area focus not only on unearthing stereotypical images of the female in literature but serve as an avenue to delve into the culture and/or the religion of people living in different geographical locations in the world. This has brought into the limelight literature from other cultures, thus making the world accessible to all. Various studies have been conducted in the area of the depiction of the female in prose; consequently we discuss some of them in this chapter. We will analyse some of these studies and identify the similarities as well as the difference between them and the study we intend to undertake in this dissertation.

In the light of the foregoing discussion, Sheridene Barbara Oersen in her dissertation, —The representation of women in four of Naguib Mahfouz’s realist novels: *Palace Walk*, *Palace of Desire*, *Sugar Street* and *Madaq Alley*l<sup>50</sup> – takes a critical look at Mahfouz’s representation of females in the four novels. Her work takes into account his social milieu and its effects on his portrayal of female characters and the roles females play in the selected novels as well as the male characters’ attitudes toward them. Although she critically treats the depictions of the female as daughter, wife and mother, her study does not go beyond the identification and justification of Mahfouz’s choice of using stereotypical images of the female. Even though she discusses the rank occupied by the female in society culturally, and how the interpretation of religion seemingly endorses the inferiority of the female and validates her subjugation, she does not probe into how issues of physical and sexual abuse, restriction to the domestic sphere and lack of education affect women. This perhaps can be attributed to her choice of texts. The novels she analyses do not,

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<sup>50</sup> Oersen, Sheridene Barbara. —The representation of women in four of Naguib Mahfouz’s realist novels: *Palace Walk*, *Palace of Desire*, *Sugar Street* and *Midaq Alley*.l 5<sup>th</sup> July, 2012.  
[http://etd.uwc.ac.za/usrfiles/modules/etd/docs/etd\\_init\\_5831\\_1176965223.pdf](http://etd.uwc.ac.za/usrfiles/modules/etd/docs/etd_init_5831_1176965223.pdf)

perhaps, provide any material for her to do otherwise. However, her research clearly shows the categorisation of women into the classes of the virgin and the whore. It also depicts male attitude towards women where the man is lord and master who must be obeyed without question by woman who must be the obedient servant. The man is pardoned for being promiscuous and allowed to stay out late without punishment; but a woman's attempt to question his behaviour is reprimanded. When Amina in the Cairo Trilogy, questions her husband about his frequent late nights out, he reacts harshly and says —I'm a man. I'm the one who commands and forbids. I will not accept any criticism of my behaviour. All I ask of you is to obey me. Don't force me to discipline you! [cited by Oersen].

The female, on the other hand, who stays out late and has more than one sexual partner is condemned into the class of the whore who must be severely punished or killed. She dare not report sexual abuse because it is deemed that she seduced her abuser. For example, Oersen notes that although Yasin sexually assaults Umm Hanafi, Yasin's father is convinced that she seduced his son. The case is the same with Zaynab, another victim of Yasin. Even Yasin's wife sees

Zaynab's reaction to the situation as unnecessary. Blame is successfully shifted from the male predator to the female; and because even other females come to see the abused one as the culprit, abusers have a field day. Hence the sexually abused female is condemned to the class of the whore since sexual intercourse before marriage or outside marriage is forbidden for the female.

Oersen also traces the lives of females in Mahfouz's Cairo Trilogy and Midaq Alley as a result of the two classes of women created by society: the virgin and the whore. Amina is one character from the trilogy she focuses on. As a typical middle-class wife, she is confined to her home and

not allowed to even go to the mosque or visit the shrine of the prophet. She is only allowed visits to her mother but even then, she is chaperoned. Her only respite is the time she spends on the rooftop of their home. She is totally cut off from the outside world; as a result, her life solely revolves around her husband and children. Her daughters are also condemned to the same fate. She is banished from her home by her husband because she dares to intrude into the *umma* without his permission when she goes to pray at the mosque on the insistence of her stepson, Yasin. Although she is appropriately dressed and is injured on her way, her husband only allows her to come back home on the insistence of the children. She sheds light on the sexual liberty accorded men in the Maghreb Arab world created by Mahfouz and how the honour of a family is strictly linked to the chastity and fidelity of its females which results in stringent rules to guide the sexual behaviour of the female.

These rules are prescribed for her by cultural and religious norms. Oersen further observes the mentality of the average male about the female as Yasin says about his stepmother,

A woman. Yes, she's nothing but a woman. Every woman is a filthy curse. A woman doesn't know what virtue is, unless she's denied all opportunity for adultery. Even my stepmother, who's a fine woman- God only knows what she would be like if it weren't for my father. [Cited by Oersen]

His low regard for women and perception that the virtue of a woman be guarded and secured by men is one that echoes that of other men in general in the Arab world portrayed by some male and female authors from that part of the world. This perception is what has necessitated cloistering of women. Most women like Amina and her daughters are not educated for the fear of their honour being lost. We will also discuss this further in our study of selected texts by el Saadawi and Matar.



Having discussed Oersen's analysis of the status of the female, we will now turn our attention to the dualities she identifies in the four novels. She observes that men are allowed the liberties denied women, a point we also reiterate in our dissertation. Men are given the liberty to have multiple sexual partners. It is this freedom that creates the other category of women – the prostitute – whose sole reason for existence is to entertain and to relieve the passions of young and old men alike. The men do not suffer any consequences for their licentiousness and remain honourable so long as they guard the chastity and fidelity of their women folk.

Likewise, Mona Takieddine-Amyuni discusses the position of the female in the Maghreb Arab world depicted by Mahfouz and Salih in her article —Images of Arab Women in *Midaq Alley* by Naguib Mahfouz, and *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih.<sup>51</sup> She focuses on the lives of the heroines of both novels, Hamida and Hosna, respectively. Both characters, as females, occupy an inferior position in the Maghreb Arab societies. They are always to be subservient to their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons, a point Evelyn Accad also makes in her paper —Assia Djebar's Contribution to Arab Women's Literature: Rebellion, Maturity, Vision.‖

Takieddine-Amyuni observes that marriage is depicted as the ultimate medium for a woman to legitimise her existence and attain respectability. Hence the heroine, Hamida, —...had grown up with the traditional belief that the only acceptable status for her was that of wife. She thought, as did her foster mother, that \_marriage was her natural destiny.‘‖ Although she has no interest in marriage, she gets engaged. However, her ambition or desire for a better life where she can

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<sup>51</sup> Takieddine-Amyuni, Mona. —Images of Arab Women in *Midaq Alley* by Naguib Mahfouz, and *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih.‖ International Journal of Middle East Studies. Vol. 17, No. 1 (Feb., 1985), pp. 25-36



adequately afford luxuries for herself, leads her into prostitution. Her desire is used by Faraj, a pimp, to lure her into prostitution. She prostitutes herself to British and American soldiers.

Takieddine-Amyuni's analysis of prostitution and what motivates Hamida to choose prostitution vastly differs from our research. This difference of opinion may lie in the choice of prose work.

Hamida is depicted as choosing prostitution over marriage due to her selfish ambition but we treat prostitution from another perspective. Our study will rather highlight how sexual and physical abuse thrust some females into prostitution. The female characters we study do not choose prostitution out of selfish ambition but as a result of both sexual and physical abuse and victimisation.

In Season of Migration, on the other hand, other female's experiences are portrayed. At a young age Hosna is forced to marry a stranger. She has no voice in this matter, the men decide and she is obliged to obey. After the death or disappearance of her husband, she is once again married off at the age of thirty to an old promiscuous man who frequently discards women as he would donkeys. Her refusal to succumb to pressures from her family to marry this man is not taken lightly. She is however resolute and opts for murder and suicide rather than live once again in a forced marriage. She eventually kills the man she is forced to marry and then, commits suicide.

This paper, —Images of Arab Women in *Midaq Alley* by Naguib Mahfouz, and *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih,<sup>1</sup> explicitly treats the condition of the female in the Maghreb, who is limited to the roles ascribed to her gender by patriarchy, culture and religion. Takieddine-Amyuni also highlights a society that does not consider the opinions of women especially in the choice of marriage partners and thus the consequent child marriages. Although

Takieddine-Amyuni's article takes into consideration the objectification of the female, her lack of voice, and perceived inferiority, she does not delve into their psyche to analyse the implications of their experiences. She does not also analyse the reaction of other men and women to the rebellion of both Hamida and Hosna and their failure to understand their choice not to conform to the virgin archetype. Again, she does not give much credit to the issue of straightjacketing and its consequent categorisation of females.

However Accad, in discussing the contribution of Assia Djébar to women's literature in the Arab world,<sup>52</sup> does so in her appraisal of Djébar's earlier works. She presents an analysis of six of her earlier texts and the kind of female characters she portrays in them. Djébar portrays females who fall within the classes of virgin and whore archetypes. Nadia, a female of French and Algerian parentage, in The Mischief, lives a life vastly different from the accepted norms for a female.

—She has been educated in French schools, and her life-style does not appear to be circumscribed by traditional Muslim customs. She goes where she pleases, drives her own sports car, and associates with men (p.803). Her friendship with Jedla is brought into focus by Accad. Jedla is a married woman, who is preoccupied with fears of not being able to bear her husband children because of a previous miscarriage. She attempts to kill herself due to this anxiety and her discovery that Ali, her husband, had a French mistress who had borne him a child. Her discovery leads her to propose that Nadia seduce her husband so that she could divorce him. This plot is however not put into action because Ali travels out of the country and she finds out that she is pregnant. Although she is happy with the discovery of her pregnancy, Nadia, Accad notes, introduces doubt into her mind. She informs Jedla that even her pregnancy would not prevent Ali from cheating on

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<sup>52</sup> Accad, Evelyn. —Assia Djébar's Contribution to Arab Women's Literature: Rebellion, Maturity, Vision. May, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40152307>.

her. Jedla thus refuses to be content with her role as wife and decides to abort the child she is expecting. Nadia later tries, unsuccessfully, to persuade her to accept the burden of womanhood. Nadia's observation that pregnancy does not guarantee a man's fidelity in marriage is the deciding factor for Jedla.

What I think is that you'd better take Ali as he is. There's no use loving him as an exception. You must show some understanding. . . . Almost any man, even Ali, can have his moments of ...instability. . . .

Don't be too proud! You ought to be content with your lot as a woman. I've come around, myself, to the point of view of our mothers and grandmothers. As long as women have a home of their own where they can serve and obey their husbands, they need ask nothing more. What if their husbands do have affairs on the outside? As long as their wifely position is respected, what does it matter? Of course they know that as they grow old, other and younger wives may take their place. But they're not jealous; they remain calm and submissive, and who's to say they haven't the right idea? [Cited by Accad]

She goes ahead with the abortion and dies in the process. Nadia on the other hand, after the death of her friend, does away with her rebellious ways and accepts her lot as a female. The irony of the situation is that the traditional female archetype, Jedla, turns a rebel while the rebellious female archetype, Nadia, comes to conform to the dictates of patriarchy.

Accad further discusses other female characters portrayed by Djébar in the novels The Impatient Ones, The Children of the New World, A Sister to Scheherazade, Vast is the Prison and The White Algeria. Her analyses of the characters place them both in the classes of virgin and whore. She depicts characters who conform and those who rebel and the consequences of both choices. However, just like the other researches discussed earlier in this chapter, she does not delve much into the psyche of the female and the consequences of straightjacketing on them.



Alamin M. Mazrui and Judith Alaba<sup>53</sup> writing on el Saadawi's God Dies by the Nile, also reiterate how honour is closely linked to the sexual behaviour of the female and the dualities existent in a society whose norms are gender biased. They do not, however, explore categorisation as well as its emotional and psychological effects on the female. Nonetheless they discuss patriarchy and its influence on the Islamic religion and how this serves as a tool to oppress and subjugate both the female and the lower class male. The paper further focuses on how both males and females fall victim to sexual abuse due to the dualities created in the Maghreb Arab society depicted by el Saadawi. They also go beyond this scope and discuss —...sex and urine as symbols of the relationship between politics and Islam in the oppression of women....<sup>54</sup> This dissertation does not treat politics as it does not bear much importance to our subject of study although both el Saadawi and Matar deal extensively with this phenomenon. Politics serves as the backdrop for Two Women in One and especially In the Country of Men.

In the light of the foregoing discussion, Gevorg Hunanyan in her Master of Arts dissertation discusses the image of the prostitute in Arab literature.<sup>55</sup> Her research focuses on the attitude of both male and female writers in their depictions of the prostitute. She concludes that male and female writers portray the prostitute differently. While Salwa Bakir and el Saadawi depict how sexual abuse and victimisation thrust the defenceless female into prostitution, male authors like Mahfouz represent how greed or ambition on the part of the female as well as poverty throws her into prostitution. It is pertinent to state here that although in our research we treat prostitution, it is

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<sup>53</sup> Mazrui, Alamin M. and Judith Alaba. —Sex and Patriarchy: Gender Relations in *Mawt al-rajul al-wahid „ala al-ard (God Dies by the Nile)* | Research in African Literatures: Arabic Writings in Africa. Vol. 28 no. 3. Indiana UP: Fall, 1997.

<sup>54</sup> Mazrui, p.19

<sup>55</sup> Hunanyan, Gevorg. "The Image of the Prostitute in Modern Arabic Literature." Electronic Thesis or Dissertation. Ohio State University, 2012. OhioLINK Electronic Theses and Dissertations Center. 24 January, 2013.



done under the class of the whore which for the purposes of our study comprises not only the prostitute but any female who rebels against the accepted modes of conduct for women prescribed by patriarchy in the Maghreb Arab world depicted by el Saadawi and Matar.

Although all the aforementioned papers do bear some similarities with our dissertation there still remains some differences. No one research, as the texts above indicate, treats the virgin-whore dichotomy from the perspective we hope to do in our dissertation. From the above-mentioned papers, we have highlighted how the various writers analyse the depiction of the female in selected novels from Maghreb Arab literature. We pointed out how they dealt with the representation of the female by some Maghreb authors. The female is depicted as inferior to the male, she must submit to and serve the male obediently, she has no voice and as a result, it is the men who decide on her behalf in all aspects of her life. Also religion greatly influenced by patriarchy seemingly endorses the subordinate position of the female. A combination of these studies is what we seek to do. Our thesis will focus on treating stereotyping from the perspective of these writers but we will also go beyond it. We will holistically study the characteristics of the female virgin archetype. In discussing her characteristics, we will look at the social, cultural, religious and biological virginal performance of the female in order to conform to what is traditionally perceived as femaleness. All these will be discussed in the light of feminism and, partly, Marxism. We will also analyse how the authors, by use of literary and linguistic devices, represent the sexual and physical abuse some females suffer in playing the roles given them by patriarchy and then discuss the effects of their experiences on their psyche. Additionally, how the plot and setting brings out the limitations of the virgin image as she plays the roles of daughter, wife and mother, will be discussed. Furthermore, we discuss which female fits into the class of the whore and her characteristics. We will therefore discuss what causes the female to deviate from the traditional image of womanhood.

The consequences of her choice to be independent and chart her own course in life will also be dealt with in our discussion of characterisation, plot and conflict. Finally, we will discuss the limitations of the female in the class of the whore and her consequent end and how verisimilitude is used to effectively blur the difference between reality and fiction to make the stories biting and real.

Our work will also suggest ways to enhance the socialisation process so that stereotyping can be reduced. Our dissertation offers a comprehensive analysis of the virgin-whore dichotomy as depicted in the Maghreb Arab world portrayed by el Saadawi and Matar. To holistically do this, we discuss the issues of segregation under spatial boundary, honour, veiling, female genital mutilation, education, marriage, motherhood, prostitution, rebellion and both the physical and sexual abuse suffered by the female. We will also delve into the emotional and psychological effects of female circumcision and sexual and physical abuse on the female. We point out the interpretation of Islamic scripture through patriarchal lens to subjugate the female. This is blamed as being responsible for the condition of the female in the Arab world by some scholars.

The scope of our research is limited to the fictional worlds el Saadawi and Matar create. Although the heroine, Firdaus, and the events in Woman at Point Zero are actual events, they are however fictionalised and thus considered as biographical prose work. We go beyond identification of stereotypes and the straightjackets women are placed into to present an analysis of the consequences of such categorisation on the female. We attempt to bring to the fore circumstances that ensure straightjacketing. We also look at how this hampers the development of the female and renders her powerless.

## Theoretical Framework

The fight to emancipate women from subjugation and inferiority dates as far back as 195 BC when Roman women demonstrated at a forum against the anti-female Oppian law.<sup>56</sup> The struggle for the emancipation of women has been timeless and universal, although the objectives might differ from continent to continent and time. The struggle is to free women from social, political, psychological and religious oppression. Feminism originates from these efforts to ensure equal opportunities for women.

The term *féminisme* was coined in late nineteenth century France and spread into other languages<sup>57</sup> to describe the women's suffrage movement. Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) is hailed as one of the grandmothers of Western feminist thought. Her paper —The Vindication of the Rights of Woman<sup>1</sup> which was written in response to Rousseau's treatise on the education of the female is acclaimed as being one of the earliest feminist texts. In this paper, she calls for a review of the kind of education given the female. She draws attention to the disadvantages of

Rousseau's position that the female be educated,

to please, to be useful to us [men], to make us love and esteem them, to educate us when young and take care of us when grown up, to advise, to console us, to render our lives easy and agreeable – these are the duties of women at all times, and what they should be taught in their infancy.<sup>58</sup>

She points out the dangers involved in educating the female solely for the pleasure of the male; that is, training her to be solely focused on pleasing the male. She notes that this will rid her of the capability to raise a family since she would mainly be concerned with her appearance. She would also be deprived of developing her intellect and, consequently, with time, her husband would grow tired of her. This tiredness or boredom with the traditional wife is what aided the popularity and high demand for courtesans. She further argues that all the faults men criticise in women are as a

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<sup>56</sup> Ruth, Sheila. *Issues in Feminism: An introduction to Women's studies*. California: Mayfield, 1990.

<sup>57</sup> Baron, Beth. *The Women's wakening in Egypt: Culture, Society, and the Press*. New Have: Yale University Press, 1994.

<sup>58</sup> Brooke N. Moore and Ken Bruder. *Philosophy: The Power of Ideas*. Mayfield Publishing Company, 1998 <sup>11</sup> de Staël, Germaine Necker. —On Literature Considered in its Relationship to Social Institutions<sup>1</sup>. Trans. Vivian Folkenflik. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.



result of the kind of education that had hitherto been given her. She thus advocates for the female to be given equal opportunity as the male to exercise and develop her faculties.

This point is later reinforced by the French female writer Germaine Necker de Staël in her paper —On Literature Considered in its Relationship to Social Institutions.<sup>11</sup> She also sheds light on the importance of educating the female and cautions against her ignorance.

Enlightening, teaching, perfecting women together with men on the national and individual level: this must be the secret for the achievement of any permanent social or political relationship.... For women to pay attention to the development of mind and reason would promote both enlightenment and the happiness of society in general. (p.608)

It is pertinent to state that Wollstonecraft and other female writers who wrote and advocated for the rights of females in the eighteenth century form part of the first wave of feminism, although as mentioned earlier, the term was not coined until late the following century. In this first wave of feminism, advocates fought for the rights to education, to own and administer property and the right to vote. Due to the efforts of women like Wollstonecraft, Harriet Taylor and Doyle Wheeler to mention a few, great strides were made. Women in the USA gained the right to vote in 1922 and to education.<sup>59</sup> These achievements did not, however, translate into elevating the position of the woman in society. This is to be expected as research indicates that the granting of political rights to women does not cause any significant changes to their situation and position in society.

The second wave of feminism is believed to have been sparked off by the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex and focuses primarily on relations between the sexes.<sup>60</sup> In The Second Sex, de Beauvoir posits that the female is viewed by the male as the *other*. She discusses and uncovers ideologies that aid in the subjugation and inferiority of the female. She criticises the —feminine mystery| myth. She observes that this myth successfully ensures that the female condition is not given much thought since the male brands her mysterious, hence his inability to comprehend her. She also argues that —one is not born, but becomes a woman.<sup>61</sup> Her book influenced a lot of women to write and explore feminism. These writers analysed patriarchy and

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<sup>59</sup> Moore

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid

its role in the subjugation of the female. Kate Millett's Sexual Politics (1970), a treatise on patriarchy, —was inspiring to many writers because she gave a systematic analysis of how women are oppressed by patriarchal institutions.<sup>62</sup> According to Adrienne Rich (1976)

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

Patriarchy then has been blamed for the woes of the female since it transcends culture and religion. This dissertation proves that patriarchy indeed in the Arab world continues to determine what role the female plays in society. Culture and religion are interpreted through patriarchal ideologies and this inevitably justifies the inferiority of the female and resulting subjugation.

Frederick Engels' The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State focuses on the link between the rise of gender hierarchy and class hierarchy. The rise of private ownership of property and inheritance instituted patriarchy and capitalist states. The control of female sexuality became a necessity to maintain order in a male dominated society. Feminism and scientific research conclude that both the male and female are not born with any intrinsic qualities but rather their socialisation instils in them qualities that are perceived to be male and female, respectively. Anthony Easthope (1986) posits that —every society assigns new arrivals [new-borns] particular roles, including gender roles, which they have to learn. The little animal born into human society becomes a socialised individual in a remarkably short time.... This process of internalizing is both conscious and unconscious....<sup>63</sup> Lerner thus notes that —Women, like men, are indoctrinated in a male-defined value system and conduct their lives accordingly.<sup>63</sup> Patriarchy through various media ensures that these roles are ingrained in both sexes to ensure patriarchy's continuity.<sup>64</sup> In the texts under study, these facets of patriarchy are vividly depicted to lend weight and prove true these feminist assertions. Since —literature encodes and disseminates cultural value systems<sup>65</sup> we will highlight how patriarchy is represented in the texts under study through culture and religion.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid

<sup>63</sup> Lerner, Gerda. —Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges. Feminist Studies. Vol. 3, No. 1/2 Autumn, 1975. pp. 5-14. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3518951>

<sup>64</sup> Ruth, Sheila. —How Patriarchy Affects Knowledge and Understanding. Issues in Feminism: An Introduction to Women's Studies. California: Mayfield, 1990.

<sup>65</sup> Kolodny, Annette. —Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and Politics of

The fight to ensure equal opportunities for women and men is not limited to politics, labour, the family and general male-female relations. It extends into academia. Hence in literature, Elaine Showalter<sup>19</sup> traces, deconstructs and divides into three the phases of women's writings. The first stage she calls the *Feminine Phase* (1840-1880) covers female writers who identified themselves with male culture. Their works under this phase had social and domestic backgrounds hence the limitations in their writings. The second stage she names the *Feminist Phase* (1880-1920). The female writers within this phase majorly protest against male canons and values. They also outrightly reject stereotypical images of women thus being critical of male authors and their depictions of the female. Also, the female writers under this phase are in favour of a utopian world. The final phase (1920 to present) is called the *Female Phase*. Writers under this phase seek to identify and analyse purely female experiences in their texts. Taking this into consideration, el Saadawi then falls within this phase. Her work as a psychologist and writer has been majorly focused on uncovering and analysing the experiences of females and their effect on them both individually and collectively. Research into literature by female writers opened up the canon to include women. This was made possible by a recovery of writings by females.

Although the mainstream female suffrage movement achieved much, it was criticised for neglecting women in other social classes and other races. Black female activists and other minority groups were among those who criticised them. They differed on issues of importance. Black women, for example, had to contend with racism as well as their gender. While they had solidarity with their male counterparts in the fight against racism, they had to battle them on the issues of gender. Barbara Smith and Deborah McDowell in their papers —Towards a Black

Feminist Criticism<sup>66</sup> and —New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism<sup>67</sup>, respectively, assert that writings by black women have been slighted and misunderstood by most people. They have been ignored and misinterpreted. Due to the efforts of some black feminists, black feminist

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Feminist Literary Criticism. In New Feminist Criticism. Ed. Elaine Showalter. 1980 <sup>19</sup> Showalter, 1979.

<sup>66</sup> Smith, Barbara. —Towards a Black Feminist Criticism. In The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends. 2nd ed. Ed. David H. Richter. New York: Bedford, 2007.

<sup>67</sup> McDowell, Deborah. —New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism. In The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends. 2nd ed. Ed. David H. Richter. New York: Bedford, 2007.



criticism was pushed into the limelight with the study of texts written by black women being accepted into mainstream feminism, and an acknowledgement of their experiences.

Other continents were also influenced by this move for the emancipation and provision of equal opportunities for the sexes. Africa and Asia were influenced by feminist theories from the West as a result of colonialism and exposure to Western culture and education. However this influence cannot be measured. In the Arab world especially, this cannot be measured because of the suspicion with which the West is viewed; consequently most women activists deliberately do not associate their work with Western theories. They rather look to ancient Egypt and other Eastern countries to find precursors and examples to base their arguments on. An outright association or identification with Western feminist thought would have damaged rather than aided in the movement for liberation of the female in the Arab world. They would have been viewed as traitors of their culture, identity and the Arab world. Many leaders of the women's liberation groups were also antagonistic to Western feminism; thus el Saadawi speaks for them when she notes it to be a —fanatical movement prejudiced in favour of the female sex and rising to its defense at any cost,|| adding that —[w]e know that progress for women, and an improvement of their status, can never be attained unless the whole of society moves forward|| [cited by

O'Keefe].

Although most researchers credit Qasim Amin, a judge, as the grandfather for women's liberation in the Arab world in general, this has been criticised as current research proves otherwise. His books, *Tahrir al-Mar''a* (The Emancipation of Woman) and *al-Mar''a a al-Jadida* (The New Woman), written in 1899 and 1900 respectively are acclaimed as the first books on women's emancipation in the East. Despite the fact that Amin had initially defended Islam and its provision for women, it is his later reformist works mentioned above that are noted. Amin advocated for education for women, changes in the laws regarding marriage and divorce as well as unveiling. He argued that —...preventing women from showing themselves unveiled expresses men's fear of losing control over their minds, falling prey to fitna whenever they are confronted with a non-veiled woman.||<sup>68</sup> Hence he concludes that women are better disposed to control their sexual desires

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<sup>68</sup> Cited by Mernissi (1975), p.31

than men and points out that perhaps it is men who need to wear the veil to protect themselves from women.

Another person who is acknowledged for pioneering the cause of women is Ahmed Fares el Shidyak. His book, One Leg Crossed Over the Other (1855), according to el Saadawi (1980) —is considered one of the first books written in support of women's emancipation.¶ She also notes the contribution of Rifa'a Rafi el Tahtawi. He

...insisted on the need to educate women to liberate them from the numerous injustices to which they were exposed. His two books, *A Guide to the Education of Boys and Girls* published in 1872 and *A Summary Framework on Paris* published in 1902 are viewed as milestones as far as the cause of women is concerned. (p.253)

Although current research and data available indicates that women actively participated in the women's emancipation in the East right from its inception, the West cites men as the leaders of the women's liberation movement. Qasim Amin, especially, has been credited with playing a major role in the liberation of the female in the Arab world and is considered a grandfather of the movement. Perhaps the West's assertion of males being the pioneers of the female liberation movement can be explained by Edward Said's theory of Orientalism.<sup>69</sup> This is perhaps a deliberate attempt to undermine the role of women in the fight for women's liberation and depict how voiceless the female is in the East. One researcher that has proved wrong Western assertion about the leaders and pioneers of the women's liberation in the Arab world is Beth Baron.

Beth Baron in her research on the women's press in Egypt, names women as the pioneers of the struggle for women's emancipation. Her research focuses on the rise of women's press in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (1882 to 1919). She establishes that some progress was achieved for middle and upper class women before 1919 when the official narrative for most women's liberation begins.

She credits the beginning of women's liberation fights to the publication of women's journals by Christian Syrians from modern day Syria and Lebanon.<sup>24</sup> She cites the first journal to be published as *al-fatah* (The Young Woman) in November 1892 with Hind Nawfal as its editor.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Said, W. Edward. —Orientalism.¶ The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001. p 1991-2012 <sup>24</sup> Baron, 1994. <sup>25</sup> ibid

She groups women advocates under three camps. These are the secularist, modernist, and Islamist.

The secularists... concentrated on matters such as language and education.... The modernists spoke of improving women's position within the family through innovative religious interpretations. The Islamist, in opposition to secularists, modernists and religious conservatives alike, stressed the rights Islam had given to women and called for a return to —true Islam. (Baron, 1994)

The forerunners of the struggle for the liberation of women in the East stayed clear of imitating Western Women's Suffrage movement or feminism. They cautioned others not to copy the West blindly. They turned their attention to ancient Egyptian and Arab history to find precursors. —By locating golden ages for women in the past, they hoped to show that the idea of the rights of women was part of their own history and therefore make it more acceptable.<sup>70</sup> They advocated for female education, pointing out that the lack of education impedes the progress of the female.

The women's movement did not seek equality with men but rather recognised the importance of men in improving the lot of the female. They advocated for women to be educated to enhance their position in the home.

Since woman's primary role was as wife and mother, the best way to improve her situation was to educate her for a domestic vocation. The rights of women usually implied social reforms that would enhance women's position in the home. The debate on the woman question thus basically centered on issues such as education, domesticity, and marital relations. Economic rights, particularly for those in need, received some attention, but political rights drew scant support before 1920s. (Baron, p.118)

They however opposed the inferiority of women. They argued that lack of opportunity, not lack of ability, had impeded the progress of women. Due to the attention and importance given to the education of women in the women's press, there was much increase in the demand for schools to be opened up for girls. Women writers' call for girl child education received much attention both from the government and the public. Since their focus was on providing separate education for the female, a lot of schools sprung up to cater to this need. Mixed sex education was not a priority for these advocates since it would have proved highly unacceptable. After they had achieved their aim of promoting girl child education, they focused on supervising the curriculum.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p.106



Education preoccupied writers in the press and often took centre stage. Female intellectuals initially justified girls' education on the grounds that the nation would advance if mothers and wives were better prepared for their religious and domestic roles. They then argued for a curriculum that included household management to prepare women for their domestic vocations. By improving women's position in the home, they hoped to raise women's status in society. The change in curriculum in state schools indicates that the women's press successfully influenced government policy, or at least accurately reflected the public opinion of a certain segment of the urban society pushing for that policy. (Baron, p.142)

Even though there was an increase in the demand for girl child education, this could only be said to be the case for the middle and upper classes but not the case for the lower class. The lower class could not afford to send their daughters to school not only because of the fees but also because the girls had to work to supplement the family's earnings. Therefore despite the prevailing norm of segregation some women actively participated in the labour force. A key area women contributed to before Egypt entered the international market was the agricultural sector. This informal sector employed mainly peasant farmers. Some women in the lower class also worked as maids in middle and upper class homes while those with some skills were employed in factories which were the only alternative jobs opened to them. El Saadawi (1980) asserts that women were engaged to work in factories during and after the First World War. She notes that

the Arab countries, like other countries of the world, were obliged to engage female labour in order to ensure that the factories did not close down.... A contributing factor to the need for female labour was that imported goods became scarce and had to be replaced by locally manufactured articles. (p.259)

Although most people argued that —...if a woman leaves her house to engage in such activities, she will lose her femininity – and probably her chastity and honour tool (el Saadawi, p.256), men of the lower class could not afford to fend for their families without the support of their women, hence their acceptance of their women's work.

Despite the fact that leading members of the women's press opposed women's work, their realisation that some women had to work caused them to defend the right of some women to work; they cited single mothers, the barren, widowed, and women who had to assist their husbands. They advocated that these women be trained —to become doctors or teachers. Those professions in which women served other women – health and education – were the first to open upl (Baron, p.148). Their prescription was not possible considering the fact most of the women in the labour

force hailed from very poor homes with no money to pay for education. Their stance also reveals a difference in the needs of women of the upper, middle and lower classes and shows that the needs of lower class women were side-lined. The plight of women and girls from the lower class working in factories and as domestic servants for example were ignored.

...in view of their wealth, and the fact that they were isolated from the poorer classes, they knew nothing about the conditions of working women, and the in-human exploitation which was their lot. One of demonstrations organized by working women ended in a gathering at the premises of the new Women's Federation, but the aristocratic leaders who were responsible for its activities paid no attention to the grievances of these poor women. (el Saadawi, p.261)

These women rather focused their attention on issues such as segregation and veiling which were of no importance to the lower class. These issues el Saadawi notes are of no interest to the lower class women since they do not wear the veil and do not have the luxury of being confined to the home but rather had to work either in factories or on farms. She, however, notes that the activities of these women led to the increment of the age of marriage for girls from twelve to sixteen years even though there was no improvement in marriage and divorce laws.<sup>71</sup> Both women and men who pioneered the emancipation of women did not advocate for co-sex education and did not seek equality with men because these would have been outrightly rejected by the masses, although co-education became a possibility years later. They also tried to win the men over by indicating their acceptance of men's right to leadership over women

Although a lot of strides have been made with women gaining access to education, an increase in the marriage age for girls and an entry to the labour force, a lot still needs to be done. One group which women's right activists have had to contend with over the years is the Islamic Fundamentalists. This group, due to its ideology, threaten the progress made with regard to the liberation of the female in the Arab world. The group advocates for a return to *true Islam* and seeks to enforce the *sharia* which is to the disadvantage of the female. They call for a return to

—...'*usul* (fundamentals) and *qawa'id* (bases) of Islam to be found in the Quran and the Hadith.¶<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> el Saadawi. p.263

<sup>72</sup> Ouedghiri, Meryem. —Writing Women's Bodies on the Palimpsest of Islamic History: Fatima Mernissi and Assia Djebar.¶ *Cultural Dynamics*. 2002. <http://cdy.sagepub.com/content/14/1/41>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.42-43 <sup>30</sup> Ibid.

They blame the female for the woes of the Arab world;

...the source of all evils, women's bodies are blamed for being the cause of the country's social and cultural failings. Because of their invasion of the male spaces, women have transgressed the Islamic moral order. Their mobility is thus singled out as the cause for the destabilization of the traditional social structures, the loss of moral fortitude, and the weakening of the family as a social primary unit. Unveiled women are chastized as prostitutes or 'Massu's whores' who have reneged on their

Islamic cultural heritage for the benefit of the enemy's culture, by 'nature' alien to the Islamic one.<sup>29</sup>

These fanatical fundamentalists resort to the use of violence, thus in some places legitimatising the abuse of women. The increase in violent attacks of women in the Arab world can partly be attributed to this. Ouedghiri observes that women are physically harassed, gunned down, burned, decapitated, mutilated, abducted, and raped<sup>30</sup> because of their perceived intrusion into the *umma*.

These barbaric acts are intended to send them back to the domestic sphere and behind their men.

In the light of this, Islamic feminists

...are examining the gendered formation of Islamic epistemology. The Qur'an and Traditions, or the authenticated sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad, are the symbolic capital and resources on which women are drawing to question misogynist social norms and maledominated scriptural and legal authority.<sup>73</sup>

Their research focuses on highlighting how the interpretation of the Quran is temporary. They do not challenge the sacredness of the Quran

...only the temporality of its interpretations. They are objecting, above all, to the fact that the Qur'an has been interpreted and history has been recorded and passed down almost exclusively by men. In their view, women have equal access to scriptural truth, and their own works are showing the difference that the gender of the author makes.<sup>74</sup>

This is to ensure that women are given equal opportunities as men and allowed to participate freely in politics, religion and society as a whole. Others like Fatima Mernissi have holistically researched into practices such as veiling and segregation. Using historical evidence, they have proven that

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<sup>73</sup> Cooke, Mariam. —Women, Religion, and the Postcolonial Arab World. || Cultural Critique. No. 45. Spring, 2000, p. 150-184

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p.150



these practices do not originate from Islam *per se*. She posits that the *hijab* (veil) had become necessary and was used to distinguish between Prophet Mohammed and Anas Ibn Malik. She further notes the negative connotation of the *hijab*.

She stresses the inexplicability and irrationality of how a verse that has descended to demarcate the boundaries between men has come to be interpreted as a barrier between men and women, thus leading to the drastic creation of an irremediable breach in the Muslim space. Such a misreading of *hijab*, she argues, also ignores the word's negative connotations. In the Quran and the Sufi tradition, Mernissi informs, the *hijab* refers to an obstacle or barrier between the believer and God. (Ouedghiri, p.9)

According to Ouedghiri, Mernissi also notes that males have fabricated and deleted some important chapters from Islamic history. The efforts of women like Mernissi and el Saadawi have helped demystify Islamic assertions on womanhood.

In the quest to break the status-quo and assert the rights of women in both the West and East, feminism has relied on other schools of thought to defend and explain its issues. Feminism has benefited immensely from Marxism and psychoanalysis as some feminist theorists have propounded theories out of these schools of thought to substantiate their argument for sexual equality, and to disprove definitions given to the sexes and the roles that have consequently been prescribed for them as a result of these definitions. Theoretical synthesis of Marxism and psychoanalysis has given great insights to explain the development of engendered roles and personalities in capitalist societies across the globe.<sup>75</sup> El Saadawi (1980) also holds that —Undoubtedly the movement for women's emancipation all over the world owes a great deal to Marxist thoughts and to the writings and struggles of truly socialist men and women... (p.117).

According to Marxism —culture and the art... are neither innocent entertainment nor independent of social forces; they play a significant role in the transmitting ideology and shoring up hegemonic order.<sup>76</sup> Therefore we will conduct our study by holistically looking at the societies depicted by el Saadawi and Matar.

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<sup>75</sup> Hatem, Mervat. —Toward the Study of the Psychodynamics of Mothering and Gender in Egyptian Families!. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/163656.pdf>

<sup>76</sup> Leitch et al. —Introduction to Theory and Criticism. | The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.

For the purposes of this thesis, we will analyse selected texts by Nawal el-Saadawi and Hisham Matar by applying feminist concepts which relate to gender roles, stereotyping, culture and religion. These will help us understand the formation of gender roles and expose the role patriarchy plays in instituting sexual inequality. Mernissi's theory of spatial boundary, as stated earlier, will also be used in our analysis.

Feminist literature that discusses patriarchal hold on religion and culture will be discussed with focus on how the authors represent both. Although Islam gives the female the right to own property, to dowry and choice in the marriage contract, these rights are not actualised due to cultural programming that regard males as superior. This is because

When family laws were codified and modernized across the Muslim world... they were based on a combination of the Islamic legal schools... pre-Islamic or tribal customs, and Western (French, Swiss, Belgian) legal systems. Muslim family law gave male members of the kin group extensive control over key decisions affecting "their" women's lives.<sup>77</sup>

Thus the dichotomy of the virgin-whore develops out of a cultural programme to dominate the woman and ensure that she keeps her place in the polity. Although both classes of females appear to be different with one being accepted and the other not, they are both reduced to a body. Even though the female in the class of the whore might appear to have obtained freedom by playing the male game and being allowed to operate and mingle freely in the world of the patriarchs,<sup>78</sup> she is still limited. This is because she exists as a prostitute to relieve the sexual desires and fantasies of the male. According to Irigaray, prostitution is man defined or manmade. The female under this class is further limited because when the female comes to see herself as an individual with rights, or ventures out to work, she is condemned to the class of the whore although she might be virtuous. Hence by use of feminist theories we will analyse stereotyping in el Saadawi and Matar's novels

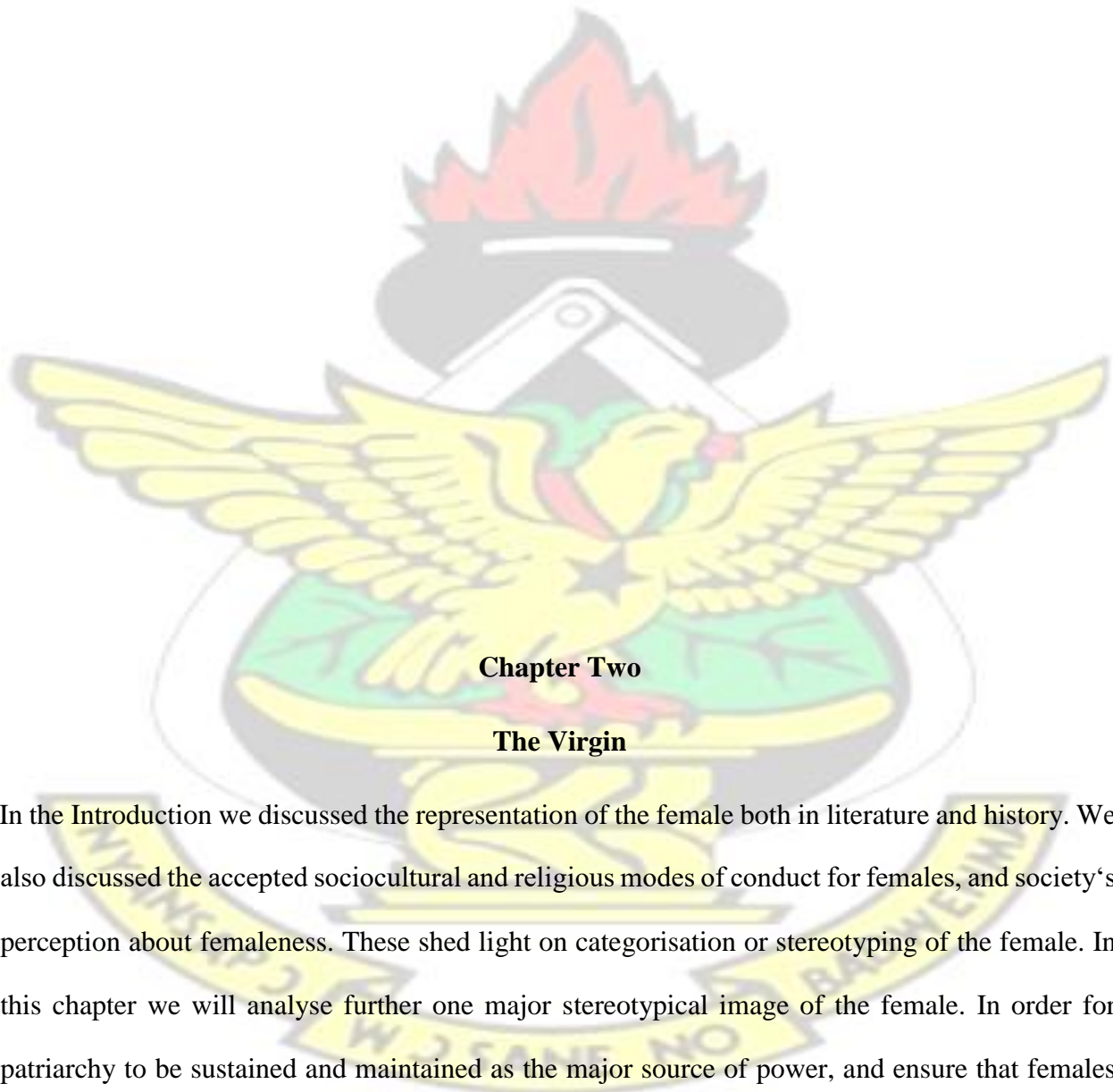
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<sup>77</sup> Moghadam, M. Valentine. —Patriarchy in Transition: Women and the Changing Family in the Middle East. I *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*. Vol.35 no.2. April 2004. p.142

<sup>78</sup> de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex* New York: Vintage Books, 1973.

and expose the discontentment suffered by the female in both classes, and its consequent effects on both sexes.

# KNUST



## **Chapter Two**

### **The Virgin**

In the Introduction we discussed the representation of the female both in literature and history. We also discussed the accepted sociocultural and religious modes of conduct for females, and society's perception about femaleness. These shed light on categorisation or stereotyping of the female. In this chapter we will analyse further one major stereotypical image of the female. In order for patriarchy to be sustained and maintained as the major source of power, and ensure that females maintain their subordinate roles both in the family and the polity, the female has been given stereotypical roles which have found their way into literature. These roles ensure that she conforms



to the accepted modes of conduct for the female. Thus patriarchy, through the media of education, art, science, media, philosophy and other agencies, ensures that these roles are ingrained in the female to ensure their continuous subservience in a given society.<sup>79</sup> These stereotypical depictions of the female are clearly reflected in literature, hence the dedication of pioneer feminists to the study of the portrayal of the female in male authored texts. One of the mechanisms used in literature is to portray her as a virgin to cause females to aspire to behave as such in real life.

Our focus in this chapter is to analyse the various characteristics of the female virgin archetype; and study how these are represented by Nawal el Saadawi and Hisham Matar in Two Women in One<sup>1</sup>, God Dies by the Nile<sup>80</sup>, Woman at Point Zero<sup>81</sup> and In a Country of Men<sup>82</sup> respectively. These texts will serve as our point of reference. An analysis of their representations will serve as a tool to highlight the plight of women generally in the Arab world. In order to successfully study the portrayal of the female virgin archetype in the selected works, it is important that we first highlight her perceived characteristics culturally, socially, biologically and religiously in the Arab world. An understanding of the background of the depiction of the female and its adaptation in literature will also aid us to analyse its limitations and disadvantages on both females and males in the fourth chapter.

Abu-Odeh observes,

It is almost impossible to list the daily practices that are necessary for the construction of the virgin/female body in Arab culture. One way of doing it would be to look at it in a —regressive fashion: women need to abstain

<sup>79</sup> el Saadawi, Nawal. Two Women in One. Washington: The Seal Press, 1986.

<sup>80</sup> ---, God Dies by the Nile. London: Zed Books, 1985.

<sup>81</sup> ---, Woman at Point Zero. London: Zed Book, 1983.

<sup>82</sup> Matar, Hisham. In the Country of Men. New York: Dial Press, 2008.

from any sexual activity before marriage, and from any act that might lead to an act that might lead to sexual activity. The further back we are in the regression, the fuzzier the list of actions involved is. *Every prohibitive demand she complies with constructs her simultaneously as female and as virginal.*

If you want me to count the dos and don'ts, the list would go on forever. It seems that everything is *aid* (shame) for girls. The function of these prohibitive demands is not only the preservation of actual virginity but the production of the public effect of virginity. In other words, the physical attachment of the hymen to the body needs to be evidenced and publicized, i.e., signified, through an elaborate performance for the benefit of the social audience. Thus, *the hymen becomes displaced from its biological vessel, the vagina, onto the body as a whole, "hymenizing" it, and producing it as a body called female. But then it is displaced again onto the social space where the female body is allowed to move/be, encircling it as a social hymen that delimits its borders.* Gender female performance covers all three meanings together, so that Arab women are expected to bleed on their wedding night as a result of the breaking of the hymen, and they are supposed to perform a —public virginity with a certain body —style, the body moving within a defined and delimited social space. Each one of the above borders, the vaginal, the bodily, and the social is enforced through a set of regulations and prohibitions that the woman is not supposed to violate.<sup>83</sup> [Italics mine]

Thus, we will discuss all three borders listed by Abu-Odeh as requirement for the Arab female that is, at best, considered as a virgin. We will discuss the social, cultural and religious import of the borders specified above. Socially and culturally the 'virgin' or 'pure' female is usually portrayed as a loving and devoted mother, wife, sister or daughter. She respects the authority of males and is a good homemaker. A female's role is one that is linked to passivity, weakness and respect for male authority. El Saadawi (1980) affirms this when she writes,

Femininity or femaleness means weakness, naivety, negativeness and resignation where girls and women are concerned. These are qualities that fit in well with the role imposed on women by society, the role of a wife devoted to the service of her husband and her children. Femininity requires a woman to share the same characteristics laudable in obedient and efficient servants, well adapted and resigned to their inferior position.... (p.117)

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<sup>83</sup> Abu-Odeh, Lama. —Crimes of Honor and the Construction of Gender in Arab Societies. | American Journal of Comparative Law. Volume 58, Issue 4 / Fall 2010. <http://comparativelaw.metapress.com/content/14x33611j8477734/>

Consequently, girls are trained at a young age to know their place and the appropriate behaviour that is considered feminine to ensure that they portray these acceptable female qualities. They are socialised firstly by their mothers, and then society, to be feminine. According to el Saadawi,

A girl... is trained and educated right from the start to shrink into a corner, withdraw and to hide her real self because she is a female and is being prepared for the life of a woman, a life where she must be passive and weak, and must surrender to the domination of the man and be dependent on him.<sup>84</sup>

She is socialised to be weak, passive, not to use her mind intellectually and be obedient to male authority because —The perfect female is submissive, walks with lowered head and half closed sleepy eyes, and is short.<sup>7</sup> These negative assertions are further supported by religion. State laws governing female behaviour and dress code in the Arab world are formulated and grounded in the Quran and *hadith*. Examples are,

...laws about women's dress and behavior passed in the 1980s by the Islamist state in Iran and long in existence in Saudi Arabia, the sexual conduct laws of the Zia ul-Haq regime in Pakistan in the 1980s, the sanctioning of honor killings in Jordan and elsewhere (until recently), and the restrictive laws passed by Afghanistan's Mujahidin and Taleban rulers in the 1990s. Muslim family laws that render women legal minors and dependents of men reflect and perpetuate a modernized form of patriarchy. (Moghadam, p.148)

The informal education of the female is very important in the Arab society which is predominately a patriarchal and Islamic one. Therefore it is very important for the female to know her place and stay within the perimeters allowed her by both religion and culture. Any violations of the rules are not taken lightly and are liable to punishment even as severe as death. The world of the female consists of the domestic sphere: taking care of the home, bearing children and satisfying the desires of her husband, much like the Victorian —Angel in the House. Her opinions are not taken into

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<sup>84</sup> el Saadawi, Nawal. The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World. London: Zed Books: 1980. p.120

<sup>7</sup> el Saadawi, 1980. p.117



consideration and she is not allowed to take active part in public life. Laws formulated on females were done taking into consideration only her roles in the domestic sphere:

In the early centuries of Islam, various legal schools of thought were established, and within the framework of the Sharia, norms and laws were formulated to meet a woman's needs in a society where her largely domestic, childbearing roles rendered her sheltered and dependent upon her father, her husband, and her close male relation. (Moghadam, p.142)

The public sphere is limited to males; consequently politics, commerce and religion are male domains which must not be trespassed by the female species. Fatima Mernissi in her book, Beyond the Veil,<sup>85</sup> asserts this in her theory of spatial boundaries in the Muslim society.

The theory of spatial boundary is based on the Islamic teachings on gender relations. To enable man fully fulfil his religious duties to Allah, it is necessary for him to be separated from the female sex. The female is credited with the ability to destroy man and society as a whole. Her destructive power is equal only to the devil; consequently, segregation and veiling have been prescribed to ensure that this destructive power does not disrupt organised society and upset Allah's order for humanity. —Women must be controlled to prevent men from being distracted from their social and religious duties. Society can survive only by creating institutions that foster male dominance through sexual segregation and polygamy for believers.<sup>86</sup>

Although Islam does not perceive the female as passive and weak, she is socialised to acquire these traits as a measure to protect the male species and enable them to pursue the service of Allah

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<sup>85</sup> Mernissi, Fatima. Beyond the Veil: Male and Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1975.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. p.32

totally. Spatial boundary is necessary in the Islamic order precisely because of the power of the woman;

In Islam there is no such belief in female inferiority. On the contrary, the whole system is based on the assumption that women are powerful and dangerous beings. All sexual institutions (polygamy, repudiation, sexual segregation, etc.) can be perceived as a strategy for containing their power.<sup>87</sup>

Her ability (*fitna*) to rid man of his faculties is what makes her powers so dangerous to established societal norms and the divine order of Allah.

The Muslim woman is endowed with a fatal attraction which erodes the male's will to resist her and reduces him to a passive acquiescent role. He has no choice; he can only give into the attraction, hence her identification with *fitna*, chaos, and with anti-divine and anti-social forces of the universe.<sup>11</sup>

El Saadawi (1980) affirms that the imposition of segregation and veiling on women is as a result of this fear of her power by males and in order to keep the morals and honour of men intact. This fear of the power of females, she believes, is because of her seductiveness. This perception has greatly shaped the Muslim and the Arab world's view of females and how they treat them.

Woman was therefore considered by the Arabs as a menace to man and society, and the only way to avoid the harm she could do was to isolate her in the home... If for any reason she had to move outside the walls of her prison, all necessary precautions had to be taken so that no one could get a glimpse of her seductiveness.<sup>88</sup>

Females are thus educated to stay within the confines of the home and submit to male authority, so that their power will not disrupt society. Arab societies are divided into two. There is the domestic universe of sexuality which is ruled by man but is considered a woman's world. Then there is the

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<sup>87</sup> Mernissi, 1975. p.19

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>88</sup> el Saadawi, 1980.

*umma* which constitutes believers; however, because Allah is considered not to communicate directly to females, Mernissi (1975) holds —we can therefore assume that the *umma* is primarily male believers‖ (p.138). She further states that when a woman trespasses into the *umma*, she wears a veil. Consequently, for a girl to fall within the category of the virgin, she avoids being in public; and when she has to be there she must be either with other women or with a male escort. She must wear a veil and adhere to Islamic dressing codes. Her honour has to be guarded as it is also the honour of her family. This is why the introduction of female education met with much opposition in Arab societies, and still does in some communities.

The virtuous female, therefore, has limited interactions with males and is to interact only with male relatives. Her honour is also based on her keeping her hymen intact before marriage. To ensure the chastity of a female before her marriage and fidelity afterwards, she is circumcised. This circumcision constitutes cutting out either part or the whole of her clitoris. This is necessary, for in Arab societies, —The honour or chastity of a girl is likened to a matchstick that can only burn once and is then over. Once a girl has lost her virginity, therefore, she has irrevocably lost her honour, and can never retrieve it.‖<sup>89</sup>

Another facet that is encouraged in the female virgin is ignorance of her anatomy and herself.

She is not taught to assert herself as an individual but act as other women. According to Saadawi,

For a woman, right from the stages of childhood and during the years of growth, adolescence and youth, is deprived of any real knowledge about her body and herself.

Ignorance about the body and its functions in girls and women is considered a sign of honour, purity and good morals and if, in contrast, a girl does

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p.117.



know anything about sex and about her body it is considered something undesirable and even shameful.<sup>90</sup>

Her lack of knowledge makes her fall prey to sexual abuse and compounds the psychological and emotional effects of female genital mutilation and defloration on her. However, because of society's expectations, a woman has to conform to this virgin archetype.

There are other criteria that qualify a female to be in the class of the virgin. She must pass cultural and religious tests to ground herself in this class. First of all, she must fully obey male authority. She must also have limited interactions with males, and these interactions must be limited to male relatives. She must also keep her hymen intact and bleed on her wedding night during defloration to prove her biological virginity. In countries like Egypt, Sudan and Yemen, she must undergo circumcision. Above all she must also lack knowledge about sex. Ignorance is highly encouraged in girls, for most men would prefer to marry what el Saadawi calls 'blind pussy cats'.

Having detailed the characteristics of the virgin female archetype, we shall now examine how the selected authors depict these traits in their female characters in the four selected prose texts. We will also discuss the measures that are put in place to ensure that females maintain the status-quo.

The selected novels are Nawal el Saadawi's Two Women in One, God Dies by the Nile, Woman at Point Zero and Hisham Matar's In a Country of Men. We will discuss their depictions of females as daughters, wives and mothers for these are the roles filled by the virgin archetype.

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<sup>90</sup> el Saadawi, p.67

In Saadawi's Two Women in One, the omniscient narrator analyses the psyche of a female teenage medical student. She portrays the struggle of a girl to conform to society's perception of femaleness and her quest to find and be her true self. Through the observations of Bahiah Shaheen, the protagonist, the narrator introduces us to the accepted mode of walking for Arab females. She must walk with —...that familiar girl's gait: legs bound together, barely separated from one another|| (p.76). To further encourage girls to walk in this manner, the fashion of the time forces them to.

Their skirts wound tightly round their thighs and narrowed down at the knees, so that their legs remained bound together whether they were sitting or standing, or walking, producing an unnatural mechanical gait, their feet shuffling along while legs and knees remained clamped, as if they were pressing their thighs together to protect something they were afraid might fall. (Two Women in One, p.7)

Their way of walking is perhaps as a result of the Islamic prescription that a female must take all care to hide her seductiveness. In Quran Surah 24:31, the prescription of how females are to dress is given:

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 others 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 to reveal certain details of their bodies....<sup>91</sup>

Then, the apparent impurity of the female genital organ is further ingrained in girls by their circumcision. A girl who does not undergo circumcision is made to feel dirty and inferior. One of the requirements of the virgin image is chastity and female genital mutilation is perceived in Egyptian society to ensure that a girl's hymen is kept intact until marriage. This practice is believed

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<sup>91</sup> Yussif, Ali A. The Glorious Qu'ran, Text Translation and Commentary. Plainfield: American Trust Publications, 1979.

to reduce the sexual desires of girls in order to secure their chastity before marriage and their fidelity in marriage. El Saadawi in The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World recounts a conversation she has with a girl who had gone through circumcision.

I did not know anything about the operation at the time, except... *that it was done to all girls for purposes of cleanliness, purity and the preservation of a good reputation. It was said that a girl who did not undergo this operation was liable to be talked about by people, her behaviour would become bad, and she would start running after men, with the result that no one would marry her when the time for marriage came.* My grandmother told me that the operation had only consisted in the removal of a small piece of flesh from between my thighs, and that the continued existence of this small piece of flesh in its place would have made me unclean and impure, and would have caused the man whom I would marry to be repelled by me.... I was happy the day I recovered from the effects of the operation, and felt as though I was rid of something which had to be removed, and so had become clean and pure. (p.53) [italics mine]

Clearly, a female is taught right from childhood to seek to please her husband and have a good reputation to ensure that she gets married. The ultimate goals of the virgin female archetype are to be a wife and a mother.<sup>92</sup> Circumcision is presented as the medium through which a female can easily attain the goals of being a wife and a mother as well as becoming pure in Egyptian society. This scenario is reproduced through Fatheya, in God Dies by the Nile. Fatheya goes through circumcision with the assurance that the procedure will make her pure.

She did not know exactly what it was that was wrong with her, but ever since her childhood she had felt there was something impure about her, that something in her body was unclean and bad. 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.

After having done what she was supposed to do, Om Saber went away leaving a small wound between her thighs. It continued to bleed for several days. (p.42)

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<sup>92</sup> Nelson, Cynthia. —Changing Roles of Men and Women: Illustrations from Egypt. In Anthropological Quarterly. Vol. 41, No. 2. Apr., 1968, pp. 57-77 URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3316879>.



The image portrayed here is that of a society whose environment dictates the impurity of females and prepares their minds to accept and undergo female genital mutilation. Fatheya depicts how the female even at the age of six comes to anticipate and even welcomes genital mutilation with the hope of becoming pure and therefore endures the pain without complaint. She also illustrates how false this cultural practice is. Female circumcision offers no solution to the impurity of the female as the result is haemorrhage; —...leaving a small wound between her thighs. It continued to bleed for several days. Clearly the female's impurity is not resolved by circumcision because she is further made to feel impure during her menstrual period. She is avoided because of both religious and cultural reasons and treated like a leper.

...she was still left with something unclean in her body which used to bleed for several days at a time. Each time she had her periods the people around her would have changed expression in their eyes when they looked at her, or they would avoid her as though there was something corrupt or bad about her.

Later, when she married Sheikh Hamzawi, he too would shy away from her whenever she had her periods, and treat her as though she was a leper. If his hand inadvertently touched her shoulder, or arm, he would exhort Allah to protect him from the evil Satan. Then he would go to the water closet, wash himself five times and do his ablutions again if he had already done them. In addition she was not allowed to read the Koran or to listen to it being read or recited. (p.42-43)

The image of the impurity of the female is carried a step further as her menstrual cycle becomes another factor used to judge her as dirty and impure. This time, since menstrual periods cannot be stopped by circumcision or any other act by man until menopause, it is viewed as a divine indictment of the impurity of the female. Culture is imbibed into religion hence condemning the female as impure. She is avoided and treated as an outcast and evil during her periods. Her clitoris and her menstrual cycle put her in the class of the impure and deviant. A gap is put between her and Allah hence the sanction not to read or listen to the recital of the Quran during this time. This shows a culture that programmes both sexes to see the female as impure and as a result lacking.

This supports the polemic texts on Arab society, culture and religion. The narrative of the extract lends verisimilitude to the text and depicts the Arab society's stance on the female. The two previous extracts illustrate the confusion of the illiterate Egyptian female who does not understand her anatomy. She simply cannot understand her menstrual cycle and rather concludes that —...she was still left with something unclean in her body which used to bleed for several days at a time. Every month the female is rejected and deemed as evil due to her periods and because there is very little separation between culture and religion, she ends up being alienated from both society and Allah. The female inevitably comes to accept her impurity and the 'purity' of the male, thereby enforcing patriarchy and the superiority of males.

In In the Country of Men, Kareem, a twelve year old comments on this. —But all women are ill... Mama bleeds all the time... Yes. Sometimes I go into the bathroom and find the toilet water red. It's disgusting. It's their curse (p.22-23). The narrator's choice of the words —ill, disgusting and curse gives a negative reflection of the female and a realistic representation of how the female is perceived in the Arab societies depicted in the novels. What makes this more biting is the fact that these words are uttered by a twelve year old boy. This feeling of being impure is acquired by girls and boys from their socialisation. The feeling of impurity is what causes Bahiah, in Two Women in One, to hate sexual organs, because of the kind of education given her by her mother as a child. She is beaten by her mother for undressing and touching her genitals to show that she had discovered that she was a girl. This gives her the wrong impression about genitals, an impression she carries even as a medical student.

She felt embarrassed when she undressed in the bathroom. She could not stand to look at her naked body in the mirror. When her fingers approached her genitals while washing, she would jerk them away, as if her hand had

touched... prohibited area. She still remembered the rap her mother gave her as a child. Her mother's voice rang in her head: \_Don't do that'... What could be hidden in this forbidden area? She would examine her body with trembling hands. She felt that something dangerous was concealed in that forbidden place. She could not touch it or feel it, but it was there all the same. (Two Women in One. p.74)

The image of a mother's attempt to prevent her daughter from experiencing the sexual pleasure that comes with touching the clitoris successfully ingrains fear into her child. The notion of something dangerous lying in between the thighs of the female is ingrained in her. Her hatred and feeling of impurity are further compounded by the fact that she does not undergo circumcision.

Every day she waited for her turn. The door would open and Umm Muhammad would enter with the sharp razor in her hand, ready to cut that small thing between her thighs. But Umm Mohammad died and her father was transferred to Cairo and that small thing between her thighs remained intact.

Sometimes she was afraid of it, thinking that it was harmful, that it had been forgotten or left inside her body by mistake. She would long for Umm Mohammad to rise from her grave and come with her razor. But the image of her sister Fawziah, limping and moaning as she walked, would flash through her mind. When her wound healed Fawziah could no longer run as she used to. Her steps became slower and when she walked her legs remained bound together: one leg would not dare to part from the other (p.97-8).

The female who does not undergo circumcision is placed in a psychological trap. She psychologically suffers for not undergoing circumcision and longs for it while, on the other hand, she is also scared of the procedure. Her mental torture is depicted by use of flashback. Flashback is used to realistically express her confusion. Although she longs to be circumcised, the image of her sister's experience scares her. She knows and sees the after-effects of circumcision but not undergoing it makes her feel worse off because she has been programmed by society to undergo it. The clitoris is given the image of evil and impurity; consequently rather than bring the female pleasure it brings pain. It must be noted that despite societal belief that a virtuous girl must undergo circumcision to ensure her chastity and fidelity, this has not been proven by science.



Rather, —sexual frigidity is one of the after-effects which is accentuated by other social and psychological factors that influence the personality and mental make-up of females in Arab societies.<sup>93</sup> The female as a daughter goes through these processes to earn her a place in the class of the virgin.

Matar, on the other hand, does not present female circumcision as a requirement for a female to enter the class of the virgin; this is because it is not part of the Libyan culture. However the female is perceived as inferior in both cultures. The female is considered as less than the man; and as a result some husbands beat their wives for giving birth to daughters. These men do not mourn when they lose their daughters. This will be dealt with under the image of the woman as wife and mother.

Having discussed female genital mutilation, wrong informal education of girls and their consequent ignorance, and their feelings of impurity, we will now turn our attention to other forms of practices that are instituted for women. For a female to conform to the virgin archetype, as we have already briefly stated, she must be ignorant and not use her intellect; her male relatives think and make decisions for her. This is depicted in all the three novels by el Saadawi under study. Dr Alawi in Two Women in One symbolises this perception of men, as he

comments that —A beautiful woman needs no philosophy‘ (p.111). The extract below depicts how the female is socialised not to think for herself. Firdaus does not know whether she likes oranges or tangerines precisely because she has been taught not to think for herself:

No one had ever asked me before whether I preferred oranges or tangerines.  
My father never bought us fruit. My uncle and my husband used to buy it

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<sup>93</sup> el Saadawi, 1980. p.51

without asking me what I preferred. As a matter of fact, I myself had never thought whether I preferred oranges to tangerines, or tangerines to oranges. (*Woman at Point Zero*, p.50)

This is an understatement deliberately used by the narrator to show how ridiculous the female situation is and depict the low regard given the female mind in the Egyptian society. The female's mind is not trained to make decisions hence she lacks the cognitive ability to take charge of even trivial things like in the case of Firdaus, knowing whether she preferred oranges to tangerines. This is something you would expect even a child to know. This realistically draws readers' attention to the seriousness of the traditional programming of the female in the Arab society, and illustrates the informal education of the female and affirms the stance of polemic texts stated earlier. Also the narrator's choice of the words —my father, my uncle and my husband depicts a patriarchal society that hampers the development of the female mind since males make all the decisions. Thus Mary F. Belenky posits that women experience themselves as mindless and voiceless, and subject to authority around them.<sup>94</sup> Thus, the socialisation of females reduces them to bodies without mind.

Also the model female must stay home to learn the roles of womanhood. Formal education does not exempt the female from learning how to cook, clean and take care of others. Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero* is forbidden from going to the field and playing with boys after her circumcision. She is confined to the home and taught her roles as a female.

I preferred to go to the fields rather than stay in our hut.... But my mother no longer sent me to the fields. Before the sun had started to appear in the sky, she would nudge me in the shoulder with her fist so that I would awaken, pick up the earthenware jar and go off to fill it with water. Once back, I would sweep under the animals and then make rows of dung cakes which I left in the sun to dry. On baking day I would knead dough and make bread. (p.12-13)

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<sup>94</sup> Belenky, Mary Field. *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of the Self, Voice, and Mind*. New York: Basic Books, 1986

The narrator presents the picture of the peasant Egyptian family where the mother is entrusted with the task of socialising her daughter into womanhood. The image of segregation is also highlighted in the extract. The female is confined to the home and performs tasks that are domestic and hence feminine. She fetches water, cleans and bakes bread for the family. These are the roles available to the peasant female in the class of the virgin. She is further taught by her father to wash his feet.

In summer I would see her [my mother] sitting at his feet with a tin 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. I had replaced my mother and did the things she used to do. (p.16)

In performing these duties, she asserts her femaleness and is taught to accept and conform to the virgin image. Her chastity is safeguarded by her confinement to the home. Her confinement ensures that her interactions with males are limited to male relatives.

In the Country of Men, the first person narrator depicts this through the experiences of Najwa, the mother of the narrator, Suleiman. Najwa at age nine is beaten by her father for laughing at what a neighbour's son said.

I stood talking to the next-door neighbor's son. He had said something and I laughed. Your grandfather saw us. I still recall the lash of the hemp of the rope chasing me down the street... and your grandfather's mysterious silence and strained smile that he always had on his face at such times. I ran into the kitchen. When your aunt and grandmother saw him they screamed, begged him to stop. He said nothing, chased me into the courtyard... His hand fell with the weight of sandbag on my cheeks. (p.170)

The child narrator brings into focus the image of a society that takes serious its norms and values. Najwa at the age of nine is not spared punishment when she laughs at something a neighbour's son says. The image of her father pursuing her with a rope and his refusal to listen to the pleas of the women folk symbolises patriarchy's resolve to keep the female in her place by meting out



punishments when necessary. This thrashing is to teach her not to associate with males that are not her relatives. Suleiman, further illustrates this as he recounts how his mother is forced to marry his father after she is seen hanging out with some teenage boys and girls in a café. According to Abu-Odeh, a female breaks her social hymen when she interacts with males that are not relatives. Najwa is consequently married off at the age of fourteen because she is seen in a café in mixed company. So, in order for a female to guard and maintain her social hymen, she is taught not to associate with other males, and to avert tougher sanctions like honour killings.

In certain rural localities, a woman might suffer the violence of honor if she is spotted conversing with a man behind a fence, or, in lower-class urban neighborhoods, if she is seen leaving the car of a strange man. In both these instances, the woman is seen as having —jeopardized not her vaginal hymen, but her physical and social one. She moved with a body and in a space where she was not supposed to be. (Abu-Odeh, p.922-23)

Abu-odeh narrates her personal experience of being an Arab female; —I am always being told, you can't smoke because you are an Arab woman, or you can't dress that way because you are an Arab woman, and if I sit in a café with a male friend people immediately begin to gossip about me. To ensure that females conform to this cultural and religious norm, systems are instituted to punish those who do not conform: gossip, thrashing, and murder when necessary.

Edwin M. Schur asserts that social stigmatization is —a key mechanism that backs up and enforces many of the restrictions and limitations placed on women.<sup>95</sup>

To be accepted in the class of the virgin, you must accept male authority without question. Most of el Saadawi's female characters are beaten by their fathers and husbands. Abuse is used as a medium to ensure that females conform. This is because males are taught from an early age to

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<sup>95</sup> Schur, Edwin M. Labelling Women Deviant: Gender, Stigma and Social Control. New York: McGraw-Hill Inc., 1984.

adopt a conquest mentality with females, that is to be aggressive.<sup>96</sup> Firdaus, Nefissa and Fatheya in Woman at Point Zero and God Dies by the Nile, respectively, are beaten by their fathers.

Nefissa and Fatheya are beaten to ensure that they obey their fathers' orders. Through abuse they are taught to accept male aggressiveness; this prepares them to accept their husbands' abuse. We will discuss this further later in the chapter. Thus, the female virgin accepts these strictures and acknowledges that she is owned by her father as a daughter, and later by her husband as a wife.

She is his property to do with as he likes. All three of el Saadawi's novels, and Matar's, assert this notion. In Two Women in One, Bahiah says that she is her father's property to do with as he pleases:

She was in the grip of fate. Iron fingers held her relentlessly. The bars were so close together that she could not even poke her head out. *Fate was her father, who owned her just as he owned his underwear.* He might or might not educate her, for he was the one who paid the fees. He could marry her off, for he was the broker, even though she had never authorized him. (p.96)  
[Italics mine]

Her imprisonment is metaphorical. Here the female's imprisonment and helplessness are depicted with the image of —bars,| —iron fingers| and her inability to —poke her head out.|| These signify the strictures of society that put the female completely under the authority of the patriarchs. The narrator compares Bahiah to a prisoner because just as a prisoner she has no option but to obey the rules of the prison and the prison warden or jailer, her father. The image of the female's imprisonment is repeatedly used by the narrator of Two Women in One to realistically depict the female situation. The metaphor of the —underwear| is used to further illustrate her helplessness and show that the female has no rights as she is regarded only as property. The metaphors of prison and underwear bring out the reality of the position of the female in the Arab world represented by

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p,148

the authors. This is affirmed by Matar that Najwa's father could not beat her only because —...I understood that I was now the property of another man... (p.174). The personhood of the female is lost when she is regarded as property that is owned by the male. The result is that the female is given very limited opportunities because her fate lies in the hands of her father, brother, uncle or her husband. To ensure that she stays within the class of the virgin, she is married off by her father at the least provocation. Farah Nuruddin asserts this in his novel, From a Crooked Rib;<sup>97</sup>

...women are – just like cattle, properties of someone or other, either your parents or your husband... from her experiences girls were materials, just like objects, or items on the shelf of a shop. They were sold and bought.... (p.80-84)

Comparing the female to —cattle, —objects or —items on a store shelf is to jolt readers to see how serious and demeaning the female situation is. This is to further illustrate the female's lack of rights and freedom because as property she has lost her personhood and becomes an object. To depict this, Bahiah (Two Women in One) is taken out of medical school and married off to safeguard her honour after she is arrested for participating in a students' demonstration against the government. Her opinion does not count in the choice of her spouse. Her father and uncles just decide to marry her off to preserve her honour, and then, of course, theirs.

All the men of the family met... \_In my opinion, we should take her out of school. Universities corrupt girls' morals.'

Another replied, \_I think we should marry her off as soon as possible: marriage is the strongest protection for girls' morals.'

A third said, \_It's my opinion that we should do both: take her out of medical school and marry her off. We already have the groom. (p.94-5)

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<sup>97</sup> Nuruddin, Farah. From a Crooked Rib. London: Heinemann, 1970.



Fatheyra (God Dies by the Nile), on the other hand, is married off to an impotent Sheikh Hamzawi, who is old enough to be her grandfather. She is beaten by her father into accepting her fate. Also, Firdaus (Woman at Point Zero), who is seen as a liability by both her uncle and his wife, is married off to an old pensioner with a deformity on his face. Additionally, Najwa (In the Country of Men) at fourteen, is taken out of school and married off for endangering her social hymen. This is done after her brother Khaled, a poet who lives in America, meets her in a Coffee House with some teenagers; —\_Your daughter is fourteen and is already spending her days in cafés with strange men. I tremble to imagine what next. Marry her now, or she'll shame us all'l (p.147). Khaled's exaggeration of events signifies how dangerous Arabs view sexual integration and depicts what they do to keep females from mingling freely with males. And shows how serious the Arab takes the issue of honour. As a result though Khaled lives in America, a very liberal society and is married to an American, he still holds on to the tradition of honour. His Western experience does nothing to soften his stance on the female and the family's honour. His report consequently leads to Najwa being locked in her room for a month;

...when Khaled told your grandfather that he had seen me in the Italian Coffee House sitting in mixed company, they locked me in my room for thirty days and rushed to find me a groom. Khaled had sentenced the flower, the young, stupid, naive fourteen-year-old girl, to life imprisonment. (p.171)

The female comes to equate marriage with a sentence to life imprisonment because she has no say in the decision to marry her off. The image of prison is one that is consistently used to depict the female situation in these novels as it best describes the female situation in the Arab world as portrayed by these authors. They rush to find her a groom to save her honour and that of their family. This is a society that guards the virginity of girls fiercely. Najwa tells her son, later in the story —...when it comes to a woman's virtue we are fierce. Fierce and deadly. And when it comes

to a daughter's virtue we are fierce, deadly and efficient. In such matters our efficiency rivals that of a German factory.<sup>98</sup> This shows how serious the notion of honour is for the Arab male and society as a whole. The words —...fierce, deadly and efficient tells how they aggressively protect and react to maintain the honour of a female.

Abu-Odeh points out that a man's honour is tied to his female relatives. His ability to guard both the social and biological hymen of his female relatives is what makes him honourable. This once again brings us to the notion of virginity. We have already mentioned that the cultural practice of female circumcision is to reduce the sexual desires of a woman so that she can keep her hymen intact until the night of her defloration. Every man, according to the nine year old Suleiman, is required to prove the honour of his wife on the night of their wedding. —It was the duty of everyman to prove his wife a virgin... (In the Country of Men, p.14). The performance of the female in the class of the virgin reaches its climax on her wedding night.

The hymen, in this context becomes the socio-physical sign that signifies virginity and gives the woman a stamp of respectability and virtue. The wedding night, therefore, bears phenomenal importance for Arab women, since it is that crucial time when society is about to make a judgment on their propriety... when a woman's failure to bleed as a result of penetration to break her hymen, is taken to have failed the social test. (Abu-Odeh, p.922)

In most Islamic societies this is an issue of life or death. She saves the honour of her family if she bleeds during deflowering. In Egypt, deflowering is done by an old woman known as the *daya*. She is the same woman who performs the circumcision of girls. In God Dies by the Nile,

Fatheyia is deflowered by the *daya*.

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<sup>98</sup> Matar., p. 147

She felt the burning pain left by the woman's finger as it probed up between her thighs looking for blood. And she felt the warm gush and sticky wet. She did not see the clean white towel stained red, nor the wound the woman's nail had made in her flesh. But she felt her virgin colours had bled, for in her ears resounded the beat of the drums, the shrieks of joy and the high-pitched trilling of the women. (p.41)

The importance of virginity to the Egyptian society is depicted in its celebration. The whole community not just a family celebrates the proof of virginity with —the beat of drums, the shrieks of joy and the high-pitched trilling of the women. Their jubilation signifies the role of honour in the Arab society. In the Libyan culture presented by Matar, it is the husband that does deflowering either with his finger or by having sexual intercourse with the bride. Najwa's father is prepared to kill his daughter if she does not bleed during her deflowering.

...I saw my father bury a gun in his pocket. 'Blood is going to be spilled either way' were the words he told your grandmother. She told me this later... 'If God forbid,' she said, 'you didn't turn out virtuous and true, your father was prepared to take your life.' (p.14)

The importance placed on a female's virginity reaches its climax when a father is prepared to murder his daughter for not bleeding on her wedding night. The hymen, as stated earlier, comes to symbolise the female and her family's honour and is therefore valued more than the life of the female. Abu-Odeh observes that the father, brother and husband are those who commit the crime of honour in Libya and other Arab countries. They are given some liberty under Libyan jurisprudence when they commit what she calls honour crimes. They are either given a reduced sentence or acquitted. A crime of honour is when a female is murdered by her father, brother or husband for either endangering her social or biological hymen and being caught in the act of fornication or adultery. The societies are represented as having a culture of inequality between the sexes. A woman is required to prove her virginity while a man is not. According to Gerda Lerner



—a married woman's sexual behaviour, such as adultery, or an unmarried woman's loss of chastity could declass her in a way in which no man could be declassified by his sexual activity.<sup>99</sup>

The mayor's son in God Dies by the Nile says —\_No, mother, I don't agree with you when you talk of equality. Girls are not the same as boys. The most precious thing they possess is their virtue' (p.51). This assertion is made by a promiscuous teenage boy who rapes their female servants and patronises the services of prostitutes. He represents the Arab male who ascribes chastity and fidelity to only the female sex.

After the ritual of proving her biological virginity, the female is ushered into the role of being a wife and, later, mother. As a wife she becomes the property of her husband. The narrator of Two Women in One compares the marriage process to a business transaction where a husband buys a wife via his dowry. Her disdain for the cultural practice that counts women as part of a man's possessions is made evident as she describes Bahiah's wedding ceremony, comparing it to a business transaction as well as to a funeral in Two Women in One:

*At a big family party they sold her to a man for three hundred Egyptian pounds... Her father paced up and down in his new suit. From time to time he put his hand in his pocket, bulging with money for her dowry... A long tail folded like a coffin around her bottom and legs... The bridal stage, surrounded by roses, looked like the grave of an unknown soldier. The drums' slow, heavy beat sounded funeral strains. Her small cold hands lay in the bridegroom's large palm. His fingers were strange. They coiled around her like the hands of fate. Under the folds of the coffin her legs moved slowly as if heading for unknown disaster.*

*...At the door to the new flat, the father handed over his property to the bridegroom: Bahiah Shaheen passed from the hands of Muhammad Shaheen into the hands of Muhammad Yaseen. (p.99-100) [Italics mine]*

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<sup>99</sup> Lerner, Gerda. —The Origin of Prostitution in Ancient Mesopotamia. In Signs. Vol. 11, No. 2 (Winter, 1986), pp. 236-254

The language and tone employed by the narrator to describe the marriage ceremony is harsh, sad and negative. This is to register her displeasure at the practice of denying women the right to choose their own husbands. She presents a picture of a society that prevents women from playing any active part in the marriage process. This is evident as she compares the marriage to a transaction where Bahiah is sold off for three hundred Egyptian pounds, and likens her wedding to a funeral. Firdaus is also married off for a dowry of hundred Egyptian pounds which is used by her uncle to pay his debts and buy new underwear. The image of a funeral is used by the narrator to depict the —deathll of the female. The narrator of In the Country of Men, on the other hand, equates marriage to imprisonment; both images depict the demise of the personhood of the female. The language becomes impersonal as Bahiah is referred to as the property of her father who is handed over to a buyer. This is affirmed in In the Country of Men as Najwa notes that she had become another man's property after her marriage. Consequently, a wife is to endure faithfully every whim of her husband. As a wife, she cleans, washes, cooks and bears children for him. When there is no food at home, she must ensure that there is food for him even if it means leaving the children to go hungry.

My father never went to bed without supper, no matter what happened. Sometimes when there was no food at home we would all go to bed with empty stomachs. But he 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 while we watched him....

At the end of his meal my mother would bring him a glass of water. He drank it, then belched loudly, expelling the air from the mouth or the belly with a prolonged noise. (Woman at Point Zero, p.18)

She must sacrifice herself much like the Victorian Angel in the House. Firdaus thus gives the best portion to Bayoumi. —When I cooked fish I used to give it all to him, and just take the head or the tail for myself. Or if it was a rabbit I cooked, I gave him the whole rabbit and nibbled at the headll (Woman at Point Zero, p.51). The good wife takes care of her husband and cannot leave him for any

reason. Therefore Najwa (In the Country of Men) takes care of her husband and begs for his life to be spared by Gaddafi's men. The virtuous wife must also endure the abuse of her husband just as she endured her father's. Zakeya (God Dies by the Nile) suffers consistent abuse from her husband.

She looked round to find her husband fast asleep, but he got up at once, and started to hit her on her head, and her chest. Then he kicked her in her belly which was pregnant with child. She tried to scream again, but her voice did not come out and when she looked at him he had come very close and was busy tearing her *galabeya* down the front till her body was exposed. She could feel his fingers around her breast, feel them creep down to her belly and between her thighs. His heavy body bore down upon her with all its strength, pressing harder and harder down on her flesh, so that the ground began to shake....

...her husband came back from the fields, and because he could not find his son anywhere he started to beat her again. For it was like that. Every time a son of hers died he would strike out at her blindly, and beat her up with anything he could lay hands on. And the same thing would happen whenever she gave birth to a daughter. She had given birth to ten sons and six daughters – but the only child who had lived to grow up was Galal. All the others had died at different ages, for life was like that. One never knew when a child would die. (p.88-89)

The image of physical and sexual abuse is glaringly depicted to show the brutality with which the female is treated by patriarchy. This proves that when the female is reduced to being a piece of property owned by the male she is treated as an object with no feelings. She is treated like an animal and physically or sexually abused with or without provocation. The author calls to attention the kind of society created when one-half of the human race is esteemed more than the other. The female, as mentioned earlier, is blamed for the woes or evil in society hence; —Every time a son of hers died he would strike out at her blindly, and beat her up with anything he could lay hands on.¶ She is not just punished when she loses a son but also when she bears female children. This depicts the extent to which patriarchy disregards, maltreats and blames the female for nature's misfortunes. The virtuous wife is the one who endures abuse and does not complain.



Firdaus is sent back to her abusive husband because of this cultural and religious perception.

On one occasion he hit me all over with his shoe. My face and body became swollen and bruised. So I left the house and went to tell my uncle. But my uncle told me that all husbands beat their wives, and my uncle's wife added that her husband often beat 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. She replied that it was precisely men well versed in their religion who beat their wives. The precepts of religion permitted such punishment. A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience.

...Before the servant girl had even started putting lunch on the table, my uncle took me back to my husband's house. (Woman at Point Zero, p.4647)

A husband's right to physically abuse his wife is legitimised by use of religion and therefore becomes a divine sanction. The female consequently has no option but to accept and endure abuse since it has been divinely approved by Allah. It is rather ironic that Allah would approve of the abuse of one part of the mankind by the other; it is the absurdity of this situation that the narrator seeks to portray. Her uncle's wife's assertion shows how the female has been trained to expect and accept abuse from their spouse. The female, to maintain her place in the class of the virgin, must faithfully bear verbal and physical abuse, and accept infidelity and polygamy. So, Najwa in In the Country of Men, says —...I must be a good wife, loyal and unquestioning, support my man regardless (p.96). Firdaus suffers verbal abuse which escalates into physical abuse from her husband. She is both raped and beaten by her husband. The abuse of girls and women is encouraged by culture and a religion interpreted through patriarchal lenses. This is depicted in God Dies by the Nile as a Sheikh, an Islamic leader, urges a father to beat his daughter for refusing to go and work in the Mayor's house. —\_What can you do? Is that a question for a man to ask?\_ responded Sheikh Zahran, even more heatedly. \_Beat her. Don't you know that girls and women never do what they're told unless you beat them?\_ (p.27). Men of the lower class are led to abuse their females to assert their power since they are made powerless or emasculated before the middle and upper classes. The abuse of wives is also highlighted in

From the Crooked Rib,

Ebla wanted to get out of bed and run away... a woman never fought with a man, she should be submissive and never return his blows... Awil stood up straight and showered hard blows on Ebla – in the mouth, at her head, on her belly. He gave her a kick or two on her belly and she tried to bite him. Ebla did not cry, she wanted to, but she knew she should not. Awil grasped her by her plaited hair and pulled her down. He jumped over her belly and sat upon her belly... \_You are my wife.\_ He unknotted her dress and she raised no objections. (p.96-97)

The virgin must not in any way defend herself from her husband's abuse; she resigns herself to receive it. Her body is his to do with as pleases him. She cannot question him or verbally abuse him because —...it is taboo for a woman to insult, shout, or even speak loudly in front of other men.<sup>100</sup> Marriage gives the man rights over his wife's body and so marital rape is not recognized in most Arab countries. On the abuse of women, some Muslim men use the Surah below in their defence:

Men shall take full care of women with the bounties which God has bestowed more abundantly on the former than on the latter, and with what they may spend out of their possessions. *And for those women whose disloyalty and ill-conduct (nushūz) you have reason to fear, admonish them [first]; then leave them alone in bed [second]; then hit them [third]. And if thereupon they pay you heed (ata'nakum), do not seek to harm them. Behold, God is indeed most high, great.* [Cited by Roald] [Italics mine]

Thus though Najwa (In the Country of Men) does not enjoy sex with her husband, she must give herself to him when he requires it. Although middle and upper class women are not portrayed as suffering abuse by their husbands, they must endure the infidelity of their husbands as virtuous women without complaint. In God Dies by the Nile, the mayor's wife silently bears her husband's promiscuous ways. Although she is aware that he rapes their female servants just like her son, she endures it. Likewise in Fire on the Mountain,<sup>101</sup> Anita Desai depicts the life of a woman who has

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<sup>100</sup> Sadiqi, Fatima and Ennaji, Moha. —The Feminization of Public Space: Women's Activism, the Family Law, and Social Change in Morocco. I Journal of Middle East Women's Studies. Vol. 2, No. 2, (Spring 2006), pp. 86-114. Indiana University Press

<sup>101</sup> Desai, Anita. Fire on the Mountain. London: Penguin, 1977.

<sup>26</sup> Cited by el Saadawi (1980) p.209,

to endure and stay married to a man who keeps a lover throughout their marriage. While a woman from an affluent background may be treated better than one from a poor background, their condition remains the same or worse. —She never washed my uncle's feet, and he never beat her, or spoke to her in a loud voice. He was extremely polite, but treated her with the peculiar kind of courtesy devoid of true respect which men preserve for women.... She came from a higher social class than hell (Woman at Point Zero, p.22-23). This extract illustrates how men from a lower class than their wives treat them. A wife, either from low, middle or upper class, is not respected because she is a female. She must always obey her husband regardless of how he treats her or what he does because according to Mohammed: —A woman, who at the moment of her death enjoys full approval of her husband, will find her place in Paradise.<sup>26</sup>

The wife of a Sheikh and some middle class men on the other hand, must accept confinement just as some upper class women.

The wife of Sheikh Hamzawi, as he had explained to her father, was not like the wives of other men. Her husband was responsible for upholding the teachings of Allah, and 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 had to be concealed even from her closest relatives, except for her face and the palms of her hands. She was expected to live in his house surrounded by all due care and respect, never to be seen elsewhere except twice in her life. The first time when she moved from her father's to her husband's house. And the second when she left her husband's house for the grave allotted to her in the burial grounds. (Woman at Point Zero, p.39-40)

The confinement of a wife to her marital home indeed validates Najwa's assertion of marriage being life imprisonment. According to Sheikh Hamzawi, the wife of a sheikh must be seen only twice in her life that is the day she moves into her husband's house and secondly when she dies. This is just like the prisoner condemned to life imprisonment she is seen when she leaves to serve her sentence and when she dies and her body is sent to be buried. The female is considered as



endangering her social hymen when she works or schools outside the home. The female must accept the stricture of confinement where it applies in order to stay within the class of the virgin.

M. Valentine Moghadam<sup>102</sup> asserts a husband's authority to restrict the movement of his wife, especially her appearance in the *umma* or public space. Also, according to Fatima Sadiqi and Moha Ennaji, the right of a husband to restrict the movement of his wife is backed by the 1993 Moroccan Personal Status Code (Articles 34 and 35). A wife is never to leave the house without her husband's permission.<sup>103</sup> According to Moghadam, other countries like Jordan and Saudi Arabia have family laws that are also based on Islamic laws where the female is considered subordinate and put under the care of male relatives. —Men shall take full care of women with the bounties which God has bestowed more abundantly on the former than on the latter, and with what they may spend out of their possessions.¶ There is another *hadith* that is quoted in favour of women's confinement to the home. However, Islamic scholars hold that this *hadith* is not authentic and thus reject it.

Ibn Umar said: I saw a woman who came to the prophet (p.b.u.h.) and said: \_Oh Messenger of God, what is a wife's obligation towards her husband.\_ Muhammad said: \_Her obligation is that she does not go out of her house except by his permission, and if she does, God, the Angels of mercy, and the Angels of anger will curse her until she repents or until she comes back.\_ She said: \_And if he oppresses her?\_ Muhammad said: \_Even if he oppresses her.\_<sup>104</sup>[Cited by Roald]

Although, this *hadith* is not considered authentic, it still influences male thought about women. Naguib Mahfouz represents the confinement of women in his novel, Palace Walk. Amina is confined to her house; her only respite being her visits to the rooftop of their house.

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<sup>102</sup> Moghadam, M. Valentine. —Patriarchy in Transition: Women and the Changing Family in the Middle East.¶ Journal of Comparative Family Studies. Vol.35 no.2. April 2004.

<sup>103</sup> Sadiqi, Fatima and Ennaji, Moha. p.95

<sup>104</sup> Roald, Anne Sofie. Women in Islam: The Western Experience. London: Routledge, 2001.

As a woman becomes a wife, she is inevitably ushered into the role of motherhood. To completely fall within the class of the virgin, it is required that a woman bears children, especially males. She is entrusted with the role of bringing up committed Muslim children. Thus, —In the contemporary Middle East, the family is a powerful signifier, and there is a strong conservative trend to strengthen it and reinforce women's maternal roles....<sup>105</sup> The virgin archetype is at its peak when the female becomes a mother. The mother is depicted as one who gives comfort and exudes warmth, protecting her child even onto death like Fatheya in God Dies by the Nile. The sufferings of the characters portrayed by el Saadawi are partially relieved by the memory of their mothers while Matar's first person narrator is attached to and greatly influenced by his mother. Najwa, who is married off without her knowledge of the groom, decides to take contraceptives to avoid having children —...she swallowed a \_handful of magic pills'... because they make a woman no good. For who would want to remain married to a woman who could not bear children? (p.12)

Barrenness is undesirable in women as this leads to divorce and limits the chances of a divorced woman getting remarried. In Mahfouz's Autumn Quail,<sup>106</sup> Qadriyya's second husband marries in secret and later divorces her because of her barrenness. A woman therefore feels incomplete without children. Fatheya (God Dies by the Nile), who is married off to an impotent Sheikh, fulfils her desires of becoming a mother by taking in a child abandoned at their doorstep. She refuses to give up the child even when the whole community concludes that the child is responsible for their

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, p.140.

<sup>106</sup> Mahfouz, Naguib. Autumn Quail. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1985.

misfortune. She holds on to the baby until she is killed with him. The ultimate goal for the virgin female is to become a mother. This is further strengthened with

Islam's position on motherhood. In In the Country of Men, Sheikh Mustafa holds that all mothers are promised paradise because of the pain they go through in labour.<sup>107</sup> As motherhood guarantees one's entry into paradise all women then aspire to bear children.

Also, mothers are depicted as providing protection, security and comfort to their children. It is the image of Neffissa's mother that comforts her as she flees her town after being raped and impregnated by the mayor.

...suddenly she sees four black hoofs moving over the ground towards her. One of the hoofs rises slowly into the air. She sees its dark forbidding underside like the surface of a big hammer ready to drop with all its might on her head. A shiver goes through her, and she screams out. Two strong arms reach out to her and lift her from the ground. The feel of her mother's arms around her, the warmth of her breast, the smell of her flesh are reassuring and her screams subside.

She could no longer remember her mother's face.... Only the smell of her body remained alive. Something about it reminded her of the smell of dough, or yeast. And whenever this smell was in the air around her, a strong feeling of happiness overcame her. (God Dies by the Nile, p.6-7)

The image of the mother serves the same purpose for Galal as he works as a soldier in Sinai. —He was suddenly seized with a yearning to close his eyes and lay his head on his mother's breast. When he woke up in the morning he discovered that he had spent the night with a parcel she had sent him under his head|| (God Dies by the Nile, p.150). Mothers nurture and care for their children. When Galal returns from war sick, it is his mother Zakeya who nurses him back to

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<sup>107</sup> Matar., p.170



health.

However, the mother is also portrayed as being an instrument used by patriarchy to maintain the status-quo in society. In Woman at Point Zero, she is the one who brings in the *daya* to circumcise Firdaus and prevents her from going to the field. She also makes her children sleep hungry while her husband eats when there is little food in the house. In In the Country of Men, on the other hand, she is the first to declare her daughter a slut for hanging out in mixed company. Bahiah's mother also spies for her husband; —Her personal papers in the drawers of her desk and under her pillow were covered with the prints of her mother's fingers, searching for love letters or her boyfriend's photograph (Two Women in One, p.59).

From the foregoing discussion, we have demonstrated how the narrators in both el Saadawi and Matar's texts depict the virgin archetype in the selected texts. The ideal female image in the Arab world is perceived as virginal. Her hymen is transported onto her whole body; she socially, culturally and religiously has to perform her virginal roles for all to see. Her honour is also directly linked to her family's honour. This is the case of Leila, the protagonist of el Saadawi's In Camera.<sup>108</sup> Hence since honour is very important in the Arab world she has to conform to the strictures of patriarchy. Any deviation from the stipulated rules of performance can lead to punishment as severe as death. Her social, cultural and religious performance includes her mode of dressing, having limited interactions with males, circumcision, and has to be a good wife against

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<sup>108</sup> Simon, Peter, ed. Norton Anthology of World Literature. Shorter Second ed. Vol. 2. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009. p.1191- 1202.

all odds. Obedience and acceptance of male authority is a must. The female child is socialised very early in life to be passive, weak and ignorant, to conform to society's perception of femaleness. Her socialisation reduces her to being an object. She is deprived of the ability to think for herself, and is rendered a child her whole life. As a result she is always dependent on her male relatives. She becomes all that males decide women should be and takes a subordinate role. Her situation is aggravated further when religion is used as a basis to confine her and deprive her of her freedom and the use of her intellect.

The experience of these women is realistically represented by both authors by use of the images of prison, abuse and the comparison of the female to an object or property. According to Henry James, —the only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life.<sup>109</sup> Thus the realistic representation of events in the four selected novels by el Saadawi and Matar depict life as it is in the Maghreb Arab world and represent the situation of the female as it in this world. Also Samuel Johnson observes that —the works of fiction... are such as exhibit life in its true state, diversified only by accidents that daily happen in the world, and influenced by passions and qualities which are really to be found in conversing with mankind.<sup>110</sup> These novels, by use of realism, draw compassion from the reader and enable the reader to identify with the characters and/or their situation. Since realism as a form in fiction is —to present an accurate imitation of life as it is,<sup>111</sup> we can conclude that the selected texts represent the true experiences of the female in the Maghreb Arab world and portray the odds against her. The characters represented by the

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<sup>109</sup> James, Henry. —The Art of Fiction|| The Norton Anthology: Theory and Criticism. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.

<sup>110</sup> Johnson, Samuel. —The Rambler No.4|| The Norton Anthology: Theory and Criticism. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.

<sup>111</sup> Abrams, M.H. A Glossary of Literary Terms. 5th Edition. San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1988. p.152-154.

authors are the kind that can be found in any developing or third world country, so a reader from that part of the world can identify with or sympathise with them.

Realism is successfully used here as it allows us to witness the female situation in Islamic SubSaharan Africa.

The use of the omniscient narrator and first person narrator in Two Women in One, God Dies by the Nile and Woman at Point Zero and In the Country of Men, respectively, gives readers a glimpse into the psyche of the female characters as they struggle to conform to the image of the virgin archetype. The disregard and lack of consideration for the female by male characters are vividly depicted to tell readers how serious the female situation is. This is depicted by the narrators by the reduction of the female to a piece of property that is owned by her father then her husband, and the abuse she suffers as a result of the loss of her personhood. This is more so in Woman at Point Zero. Since the plot consists of actual events that have been fictionalised, there is therefore a very thin line between fiction and reality. The plot of the novel is presented in such a way that the reader is unable to differentiate between facts and fiction since verisimilitude is properly used by the narrator. Also the use of the first person narrator helps to achieve this blur between fiction and facts. We are drawn to Firdaus as we would to any human and feel her pain and not much surprised about her decision to become a prostitute after years of abuse and conformity to the prescriptions given to womanhood. We sympathize with Najwa as she becomes an alcoholic, and suicidal. Her trauma of being forced to marry a stranger at fourteen and becoming a mother, and her inability to live beyond these experiences greatly touch us. We become angry with a practice that regards women as inferior to men, thus the denial of their right to education and choice in marriage.



Also, as the narrators depict the thoughts and feelings of the characters through dialogue and monologue, the characters are brought to life and their situations become real to the reader. Their anxiety and the consequences of their actions as well as their struggle with social expectation and deviation from acceptable norms in their society are therefore realistically depicted. The effects of abuse and other practices on the psychological health of the female are depicted by both authors to indicate how serious the current situation of the female is, and to advocate for change. This, as a result, accounts for the realistic and glaring portrayal of the female experience in her daily life in the novels under discussion.

In the next chapter we will analyse the representation of the female as whore. We will discuss further how narrative technique, imagery and realism are used to realistically portray the whore archetype in the novels under study. We will also examine the socio-cultural and religious treatment of those females who unconsciously or consciously choose not to conform to the image of the virgin.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **The Whore**

In the previous chapter we discussed the female as a virgin in the Arab world as portrayed in the novels of el Saadawi and Matar. The said virgin conforms to social, cultural and religious perceptions of femaleness to be acceptable in her social milieu. The hymen is transported from her vagina to her whole body and her virginity becomes a social, physical and biological issue.

Her failure to conform to prescribed norms puts her into the class of the fallen woman or whore. In this chapter we will discuss the representation of the female as a whore in the selected texts. In this study, the term —whore‖ will be used to denote females who rebel, whether consciously or

subconsciously, against socio-cultural and religious norms and perceptions of femaleness. These females strive to breakout from monotony and strive to establish themselves as individuals with voices. Our discussion in this chapter will thus focus on analysing how narrative technique, imagery, realism and language are used to highlight the female situation in the Arab world depicted by el Saadawi and Matar; what causes the female to rebel, what she rebels against and the media she chooses for her rebellion and how this is depicted in prose.

Historically, the whore image in the Arab world has been associated with females who behave contrary to what is perceived as traditional feminine behaviour. A female is condemned to the class of the whore when she does not live as prescribed by her social milieu. They express traits that are considered masculine. —A woman with courage and ambition, with eyes wide open, and who shows audacity and strength, is still considered ugly, repulsive, coarse and vulgar. In other words she symbolises the prostitute, the fallen and degraded female.<sup>112</sup> Thus the prostitute and the career or independent female are both condemned to the same class.

Most female writers in Africa and the Middle East (Arab) concern themselves with the inner struggles of the female characters to find and be themselves. The quest of these female characters is to move from being considered as objects to attaining personhood or personal identity.<sup>2</sup> The quest of attaining personhood,

...is rebellion in the face of the realization of the oppression that women must undergo in North Africa and the Middle East; this is a thing apart from the fairly universal human experience of rebellion on the way to maturity... in most parts of North Africa and the Middle East: women are born to fill

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<sup>112</sup> el Saadawi, Nawal. *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*. London: Zed books, 1980. p.246 <sup>2</sup> Accad, Evelyn. —Assia Djebar's Contribution to Arab Women's Literature: Rebellion, Maturity, Vision. *World Literature Today*. Vol. 70, No. 4, (Autumn, 1996), pp. 801-812 May, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40152307>. <sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.802

the roles of daughter, wife, and mother, to be successively subservient to their fathers, husbands, and sons. Education for women is in most cases regarded as superfluous, few occupations outside the home are open to women, and in most cases the legal status of women is determined by the shari'a or Muslim religious code. In court, a woman's testimony is accorded only half the weight of a man's, a husband may divorce his wife without recourse to legal action... and the law permits a husband or father to force his wife or daughter to remain at home...<sup>3</sup>

This implies that the female is not given room to be anything other than what tradition and religion prescribes. Therefore the female, who takes a different stance from the prescriptions of society listed in the above extract, and rebels, is regarded as a whore. In the Arab world, a female is also considered a whore if she intrudes into the *umma* without permission or the appropriate dress code. The appropriate dress code means she has to be fully covered up and wear a veil so that her seductiveness is concealed to avoid *fitna* from occurring. Gerda Lerner posits that veiling was introduced as a means to differentiate between the respectable and unrespectable or *fallen* female.

The veil, the symbol and emblem of the married woman, is ...elevated to a distinguishing mark and its wearing made a privilege... we can see that the distinction between the women is based on their sexual activities. Domestic women, sexually serving one man and under his protection, are here designated as "respectable" by being veiled; women not under one man's protection and sexual control are designated as "public women," hence unveiled.<sup>113114</sup>

An unveiled female in public is considered a prostitute; and without male protection, is fair game to men.<sup>115</sup> According to Mernissi (1975, p.143), when males from the rural areas come to the city they assume that every female that walks the streets is sexually available. However, Mernissi (1991) gives a different historical background to the origin of the veil. She argues that veiling was introduced to help people distinguish between the prophet Mohammed and another religious leader, Ibn Malik. Under the media chosen by these females to assert their individuality, therefore, we will also discuss prostitution. It is the major medium chosen by authors to depict the

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<sup>113</sup> Lerner, Gerda. —The Origin of Prostitution in Ancient Mesopotamia. | *Signs*. Vol. 11, No. 2 (Winter, 1986), pp.

<sup>114</sup> -254 URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174047>

<sup>115</sup> Lerner, p.252



independent or rebellious female who refuses to submit to the traditional notion of femaleness. The term ‘\_whore’ is synonymous with prostitute. Whore is also used to denote a female who moves within prohibited spatial circles.

Also, asserting one’s will as a female is considered abnormal. This is because in the Arab world, the female is always to be under the care and authority of the male.<sup>116</sup> She is prone to various forms of abuse, with her freedom being limited. However females who decide to break free from this male authority are seen as upsetting the natural social order. It is important to note that rebellion is synonymous with whoredom in the societies in question. This is because the honour of an Arab family is linked solely to the virtue of the female. Worsening the female situation is serving as a representation of her country. The female body comes to represent her nation and culture. Her success in the social, physical, cultural and religious performance of virginity is what secures the honour of her family.<sup>117</sup> As a result, our study will not deal solely with prostitution as the term —whorel connotes but with rebellion in general by female characters in the face of subjugation, as depicted by el Saadawi and Matar in their works set in Egyptian and Libyan societies, respectively.

The image of the female whore is depicted in various forms in the selected texts. In In the Country of Men, this is portrayed through Najwa’s attempts to rebel against the spatial boundary in the Libyan society by hanging out with her male and female peers in a coffee house. She is called a slut —Your grandmother grabbed me by the hair and threw me in my room. \_You have

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<sup>116</sup> Roald, Anne Sofie. *Women in Islam: The Western Experience*. London: Routledge, 2001.

<sup>117</sup> Welchman, Lynn and Sara Hossain (eds), Honour’: Crimes, Paradigms and Violence Against Women. London: Zed Books, 2005. p.1-21

shamed me, you little slut. Now your father will think I haven't brought you up right' (p.147). This extract indicates that a *good* girl does not hang out in mixed company in public. Mernissi (1975, p.137) observes that —...there are no accepted patterns for interactions between unrelated men and women. Such interactions violate the spatial rules that are pillars of the Muslim sexual order. Hence any female who flouts this is condemned to the class of the whore as Najwa is. We will discuss this further when we analyse prostitution as a medium of rebellion.

Although Najwa's attempt to rebel against traditional norms of femaleness fails, it is important to discuss these because they place her in the class of the female whore. Najwa's act of hanging out in a café violates the law of spatial boundary. She endangers her social hymen and breaks her social virginal performance.<sup>118</sup> Her brother's words: —\_Your daughter is fourteen and is already spending her days in cafés with strange men. I tremble to imagine what next. Marry her now, or she'll shame us all' (p.147), states the stance of society and the family's fear of —...the other men... who were bound to talk if she wasn't married at once (p.144) is what causes her father and brothers to marry her off at fourteen. Westernisation and \_enlightenment' do not change the male perception of females in this society as is depicted by Khaled's reaction to his sister hanging out with other teenagers. Although he lives in America and is married to a Caucasian lady, his ideas about the accepted modes of conduct for females do not change. His ideas do not change perhaps because for the Muslim the laws of spatial boundary are authenticated by the *sharia* and thus sacred and should not be challenged.<sup>119</sup> His betrayal is what plunges Najwa into a life of misery.

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<sup>118</sup> Abu-Odeh, Lama. —Crimes of Honor and the Construction of Gender in Arab Societies. *American Journal of Comparative Law*. Volume 58, Issue 4 / Fall 2010.

<sup>119</sup> Ouedghiri, Meryem. —Writing Women's bodies on the Palimpsest of Islamic History: Fatima Mernissi and Assia Djebar. *Cultural Dynamics*. 2002. p.42

Furthermore, Najwa's insistence not to bath throughout the month she spends locked up in her room symbolises her assertiveness as opposed to the image of the timid virgin female. She, moreover, questions her punishment,

I raised my voice in argument, as if Libya and my family had all appeared before me. \_What do you want her to do?\_ I said into the wind. \_Die? Disappear off the face of the earth? You forbid her school, lock her away for thirty days and now want to marry her to a complete stranger with a big nose. How fantastic!\_ (p.172)

This is a situation which is unacceptable, especially when she refers to the nose of the stranger she is married off to. Her reference to his nose is unacceptable because —Discussing the nose of a suitor suggested desire... and —A good, virtuous, chaste girl... ought to only be concerned with the character of her suitor, not his nose.<sup>120</sup> Her reference to the nose of her suitor depicts her revulsion against his physical attractiveness and the impending forced marriage.

Another act of rebellion is her attempt to avoid getting pregnant in order to free herself from her marriage to pursue her education. It is common knowledge that *good* girls do not use contraceptives and thus her use of them puts her in the class of the whore. The main role of the female is mothering; and her attempt to sabotage this is unacceptable in a patriarchal society where the female has no rights even over reproduction. —From the middle of the second millennium B.C. on, from public veiling to the regulation by the state of birth control and abortion, the sexual control of women has been an essential feature of patriarchal power.<sup>11</sup> She degenerates further by becoming an alcoholic and a chain smoker. Only *bad* girls smoke and drink; —This is not only

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<sup>120</sup> Matar., p.173

<sup>11</sup> Lerner, p.254



forbidden by God and tradition, it is also illegal.<sup>121</sup> The female position depicted here becomes significant in the fact that even though the consumption of alcohol is against Islamic religious beliefs, the male is easily forgiven. Abu-Odeh (2004) narrating her personal experience of being an Arab female says;

I am always being told, you can't smoke because you are an Arab woman, or you can't dress that way because you are an Arab woman, and if I sit in a café with a male friend people immediately begin to gossip about me.

Najwa's attempt to kill herself and her son by leaving the gas on at night further pushes her into the class of the fallen woman. A woman's role is to nurture and give life and any action contrary to this is considered abnormal. Najwa, in most cases, conforms to the image of the virgin yet the traits discussed above place her in the class of the whore. The whore traits are successfully hidden from the public. Only Suleiman, her nine year old son is aware of these until later a neighbour, auntie Salma, finds her drunk. It is apparent that society and religion's disapproval of these traits is what causes Najwa to hide her alcoholism and emotional instability from even her husband. This also explains why the narrator, Suleiman, also hides these traits in her character from others. Categorisation therefore, does not give a true representation of females; it limits them and curtails development of their independence. It also leads to severe health issues as it affects the psyche of the female. We will do an in-depth analysis of this in the next chapter as we look at how el Saadawi and Matar depict this in the novels under study.

In the light of the foregoing discussion, we will now discuss el Saadawi's representation of the female whore archetype in Two Women in One through Bahiah Shaheen. Two Women in One, as

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<sup>121</sup> Matar., p.63

the title suggests, treats the virgin-whore dichotomy. The narrator goes into the psyche of Bahiah, a teenage medical student, who struggles within herself. The novel chronicles her struggles in deciding whether to accept the roles prescribed for her by society, or go against them. Through the existentialist concept of the absurdity of life we are taken into the mind of the protagonist as she struggles and later rebels against conformity to the image of the virgin in order to discover herself.

Bahiah's first act of rebellion is to go against her father's orders forbidding her from painting. Her father's voice is the voice of Arab society and reflects how it looks down on the arts. Perhaps this is so because the arts or painting has the ability to open up people to discover themselves and thus attain personhood. Hence by preventing her from painting she is denied the opportunity to be herself. However Bahiah continues to paint secretly despite her father's warnings, and further displays her work in an art exhibition. Her refusal to give up painting leads her to Saleem Ibrahim, a political activist who helps her to find and be herself. Although she is constantly at war within herself about her identity and hesitant about pursuing her real self, this war takes a decisive turn when she meets the activist. She falls in love and is compelled to find herself and fight the strictures of society. Saleem pushes her to find herself. He tells her: —Bahiah Shaheen will always prevent you from attaining any goal. You will always stand in the middle of the road and fall into the trap of the mundane, like countless millions of others.<sup>122</sup> His statement draws attention to the fact that Bahiah is the creation of a society that trains or teaches the female to conform. She is as a result not real as her true identity is not allowed to show forth. Thus society's expectations of the female are a —trap that prevents her from being her true self. It is only when the female recognises this fact she has the opportunity to be herself. Therefore Bahiah's love for Saleem portrays the key

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<sup>122</sup> el Saadawi., p.47

that leads her to this realisation. Her love gives her courage and causes her to participate in a demonstration against the ruling government of Egypt.

As she chants with the crowd the slogan —Egypt shall be free! ...She was determined that there would be no going back; no power on earth could stand between her and her freedom (p.82-83).

The female's lack of freedom is symbolised in the image of a prison. Though the end of the demonstration is bloody, —...she realized that this moment was her real age, that all past days and years were no more than dream or illusion (p.86). Bahiah's epiphany again symbolises how the female remains dead until she opts for freedom and expresses her individuality. Hence even her arrest with Saleem only further strengthens her resolve to be free. By going to Saleem, she becomes her real self, asserting her individuality and therefore shattering the glass that served as a barrier between her and her true self. She comes to the realisation that,

...she was not Bahiah Shaheen after all: she was not his daughter, nor was she polite, obedient or a virgin; she had actually been born with sexual organs.... By moving she had torn away the membrane, intangible and invisible, like a transparent glass panel dividing her from her body, standing between herself and her reality. (p.75)

The —...membrane, intangible and invisible... dividing her from her body... represents the cultural and religious strictures that have been instituted to keep the female in the class of the virgin. In choosing freedom the female tears apart these strictures and defiles them in order to discover her true self. Evelyn Accad observes that the quest for emancipation and consequent revolt against customs that undermine the female lead —to political awakening in the hope of finding solutions to women's problems through political commitment.<sup>123</sup> Bahiah joins the demonstration and later the fight for liberation precisely to expose the ambivalence in Islam giving

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<sup>123</sup> Accad, 1996.



the female the right to choose who to be with then denying her this right in most cases.<sup>124</sup> Thus her choice to be with Saleem contravenes societal norms, making her a rebel.

Her arrest after the demonstration results in her family's decision to take her out of school and marry her off after her father bails her out of prison. She, however, defies tradition and societal norms to run away. Her love for Saleem and desire to be with him compel her to free herself:

She saw her real self in his eyes. Going to him was an assertion of her freedom and choice. When she was with him... she would be in the grip of a new, wild, nameless desire: the desire to be her real self and to trample all other wills with hers, to tear her birth certificate into pieces, to change her name, to change her father and mother, to gouge out the eyes of those who cheated and deceived her, including herself, so that no one would be able to take her own eyes and replace with eyes that were not hers. (p.97)

Saleem symbolises emancipation for the female; as such he inspires Bahiah to fight to be free. He sees her for who she is without the strictures of society. —Eyel is used to depict society's perception of who the female is, hence, Bahiah's wish to gouge out her eyes —...so that no one would be able to take her own eyes and replace them with eyes that were not hers. This is a metaphorical representation of how the female is falsely taught to see herself through the eye of the society. Thus by gouging out the —false eyel she replaces them with eyes devoid of all prejudice against the female. She comes to see her true self as neither lacking nor inferior to the male. It is considered a taboo for a woman to shout at or insult a man<sup>125</sup> but by beating her husband and Dr. Alawi, she debunks the assumption that a female is weak physically because of her biological makeup. Muhammad Yaseen, her husband, is surprised by her strength;

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<sup>124</sup> Nelson, Cynthia. —Changing Roles of Men and Women: Illustrations from Egypt. | *Anthropological Quarterly*. Vol. 41, No. 2 (Apr., 1968), pp. 57-77 URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3316879>.

<sup>125</sup> Sadiqi, Fatima and Ennaji, Moha. —The Feminization of Public Space: Women's Activism, the Family Law, and Social Change in Morocco. | *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*. Vol. 2, No. 2, (Spring 2006), pp. 86-114.

...he attacked her like a ravenous beast. She kicked him in the stomach and he fell to the floor, wiping his eyes in surprise and disbelief. *This foot could not possibly belong to a female. For a female's foot, from his experience with prostitutes, was so soft and small that he could bend it with one hand. But this foot was as firm and strong as a bullet.* He told himself that a wife was not the same as a prostitute... so he attacked more violently. She merely kicked him all the harder. (p.101) [italics mine]

From the extract, the narrator in one breath represents the strength of women and shatters the ideology of women being considered fragile. She consistently affirms this as Bahiah notes that —...she was sure... that nothing in her was breakable (p.77). She also advocates that women use violence when necessary to defend themselves from abusers. So, Bahiah physically attacks Dr.

Alawi.

His hands caressed her and he pressed her to his chest.... He held both her wrists in one and started to undress her with the other. She kicked at him strongly and he fell. As he picked himself up, he stared at her in astonishment.... \_It seems I've made a mistake... I thought you were in love with me.'

\_Where on earth did you get that idea?' she answered in amazement.

\_I understand women', he said in his lecturer's tone.

\_With what brain?'

He pointed to his head and smiled. \_Man has only one brain, in his head. Didn't I teach you that in the dissecting room?'

\_The dissection room is one thing, the truth is another', she replied scornfully.

\_What is the truth?'

\_That a man's brain is not in his head.'

\_Where then?'

\_Between his legs', she answered boldly.

He put on his jacket, saying, \_You're not normal, girl.'

\_You're a perfectly normal man', she said smiling. (p.111)

The male is perceived to be rational and thus intelligent, so her position that the male is controlled by his genital organ is insane and unacceptable. This is because she reduces the male to an emotional being, a spot which is reserved for the female. Her declaration that she has her own philosophy of life contradicts perceived femaleness. This is noted by Dr. Alawi as he

—...laughed out loud. \_A ...woman needs no philosophy' (p.111), implying a woman has no brain to think with.

Moreover, society's disdain for a strong woman is depicted by the conversation between Bahiah and her *husband*.

He shouted angrily, 'You are not a woman.'  
The traditional insult a man hurls at a woman, believing that it will cause the earth to tremble under her and that she would be left with nothing. What could possibly be left to a woman if she does not worship men's genitals? She shrugged her shoulders and said, 'Anyway, who told you that I am a woman?' (p.102)

Her boldness and the question show her resolve to assert herself. Mohammed's outburst, —You are not a woman depicts the false notion of how the female loses her femininity when she asserts and defends herself from the male and society (that is cultural practices that are against her rights). According to el Saadawi, the female's attachment to her family is what endangers her. This is demonstrated through Bahiah. She decides to rebel but unlike other women, she does not turn to prostitution but chooses to escape marriage and wait for her beloved Saleem. On her wedding night she rejects her husband and tries to create a scandal:

...for scandal alone could save her now, could make everyone cast her out. She wanted to be cast out, to have no mother or father, and no family to protect her. For protection itself was the real danger: it was an assault on her reality, the usurpation of her will and her very existence. (p.102-3)

The narrator in this extract points out that familial relation or attachment is an underlying factor in the female situation in the Arab world. The individuality of the female is suppressed in the name of protection. Hence it is only by cutting off her relationship with her family that she can have the freedom to choose and assert herself. This is proven true in the case of Firdaus, and in

Najwa's case because she holds on to her family and so she is trapped in a loveless marriage. In order to escape, Bahiah physically assaults her husband when he makes sexual advances towards her on their wedding night:



‘I’m not a prostitute.’  
‘You’re my wife’, he said in his owner’s voice.  
‘Who said so?’ she asked in astonishment.  
‘Your father, myself and the marriage broker.’  
‘That must be the basest deal in history!’ she shouted angrily. (p.102)

She insists that she is not Muhammad Yaseen’s wife. The above conversation between them further reveals the narrator’s disdain for a culture that does not give the female the right to choose her spouse. Through this she advocates that women be given the choice to marry whoever they choose. Choice of a spouse should not rest on a family but the bride. The novelist’s choice of words in this exchange illustrates marriage in the Arab world. Bahiah is Mohammed’s wife because —Your father, myself and the marriage broker<sup>1</sup> say so. Bahiah’s response —That must be the basest deal in history!<sup>2</sup> is to ridicule the marriage process and point out that the female is not an object to be sold off. She has a voice and can protest. The narrator is in favour of Bahiah abandoning a marriage contracted without her consent. Although Bahiah could have run away to avoid being married off, she decides not to because —she knew they would interpret her escape from home in sexual terms alone...<sup>3</sup> (p.97) and does not want it to be so. This indicates that female action is usually perceived in sexual terms; it is as though she cannot act on her own.

Bahiah as el Saadawi’s ideal female character reflects the odds against women in the Arab world. In the text, Dr. Alawi says all the authorities are against her but she still decides to live on her own and earn a living by painting. She becomes an outcast in the community where she lives, and is ridiculed;

The men in the neighbourhood gazed at her from the shops; the women stared through keyholes and cracks in the windows. Was she woman or man? Had it not been for the two small breasts showing through her blouse, they would have sworn she was a man. But since she was a woman, it was legitimate to stare. Her body was victim of hungry, deprived eyes. They stared at her and whispered... Street urchins were encouraged to follow her wiggling their bottoms. Teenage boys would expose themselves to her. One threw a stone, another let out a long catcall... Women would strike their breasts... saying, ‘Just look at what

Western women are like!‘

She fought her way through stares, noise and obscene remarks. She raised her black eyes and pursed her lips in anger, defying fate. Once she disappeared down the street, life in the neighbourhood returned to normal. (p.120)

Their inability to tell whether she was male or female depicts how the female presumably loses her femininity when she asserts herself. Female independence consequently is seen as western because it is indeed foreign to the Arab. She is ridiculed and attacked to illustrate how the independent female is treated by her society. However, although she is ostracised as a result of her rebellion and is forced to live in hiding, her resolve is not affected. It rather fuels her to work with Fawzi and Raouf to educate people and cause them to face reality. The three operate a secret printing press that publishes articles against the ruling government;

‘People of Egypt! Awake! Throw open your windows, open your eyes and see the chains coiled around your necks! Open your minds and see that the sweat of your brows is being plundered. Your crops are stolen, your flesh devoured until you are left only skin and bones, queuing skeletons each leaning on the other. Your breath is torn by fits of coughing and blood pours from a deep wound in your chest.’ (p.116)

This extract is a wake-up call to Egyptians. —Throw open your windows, open your eyes and see the chains coiled around your necks! is a call for them to come out of the strictures of society.

The image of —chains coiled around your necks! depicts slavery and —open your minds! signifies their ignorance and the call for them to be enlightened and see things as they really are. Furthermore the image of the —skeleton! shows that they are exploited and left with nothing but pain. The image of the —wound in your chest! is a reflection of the pain that is suppressed in them. This leads to depression and other ailments because they are not given the opportunity to voice out their pain. Bahiah and her friends distribute the newsletter to the masses of Egypt themselves to enlighten them. Even her knowledge of the police spying on her does not stop her. She willingly gives in to her arrest. She represents the female who successfully escapes marriage and her family

and attains independence. She overcomes all the odds against her to achieve personhood, finds her purpose and works towards it. She is arrested not for issues relating to her escape from home but for her political involvement. However, her arrest shows that society is against the whore archetype. She might end up like Joan of Arc.<sup>126</sup>

Bahiah achieves financial and political independence as well as her right of choice. A female's right of choice is greatly hindered in patriarchal societies and more so in the Arab world. This is so because the economic situation of women depends largely on men, the ideal protectors and breadwinners.<sup>18</sup> Money is, therefore, used as a tool to enforce the inferiority and subjugation of the female. Therefore the emancipation of the female from male authority or ownership is greatly linked to her ability to earn her own income. Financial freedom does not secure the independence of females per se. However, a woman with no connection to affluent male relatives easily becomes a victim of poverty which can cause her to fall into prostitution in order to earn a living.

Now that we have dealt with the rebellion of Bahiah, we shall turn our attention to prostitution. Prostitution as an act of rebellion, provides an avenue for the female to earn her own income and live independently. However, some prostitutes do not choose this medium freely but are forced into it by either poverty or persistent sexual and physical abuse. They are also sometimes forced into it by relatives or pimps.

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<sup>126</sup> She is the protagonist of Bernard Shaw's play Saint Joan. She is burned at the stake although she leads men to war. Saint Joan: A Chronicle Play in 6 Scenes and an Epilogue. London: Constable & co., Ltd, 1924. <sup>18</sup> Nelson, p.61.



El Saadawi depicts the plight of the female who chooses prostitution as a tool for emancipation in Woman at Point Zero. In a society where honour is closely tied to the virginity of daughters, a female who loses her virginity before marriage is not treated kindly. As a result, a victim of rape or seduction easily resorts to prostitution to avoid marriage, physical abuse and honour killing. Prostitution, therefore symbolises rebellion against societal, cultural, and religious ideologies of femaleness. As a prostitute, a woman earns a living and attains at least a façade of power over her body. Her ability to reject the advances of some men come to the fore here; —...I could decide on the food I wanted to eat, the house I preferred to live in, refuse the man for whom I felt an aversion no matter what the reason, and choose the man I wished to have....<sup>127</sup> We observed in the previous chapter that the female is considered the property of her father and close male relatives, and is sold into marriage through dowry. She cannot choose who to be sexually involved with as the decision rests on her male relatives. Therefore Firdaus' ability to choose who to give her body to is in a sense an achievement. According to Simone de Beauvoir,

paradoxically enough those women (hetairae) who exploit their femininity to the hilt, create for themselves a situation almost equivalent to that of a man; beginning with that sex which gives them over to the males as objects, they came to be subjects. Not only do they make their own living like men, but they exist in a circle that is almost exclusively masculine, free in behaviour and conversation, and they can attain the rarest intellectual liberty.<sup>128</sup>

Additionally, we have established in Chapter Two that Islam believes in the sexual power of females; and the various rules regulating female sexuality and practices such as polygamy, honour killings and repudiation are as a result of this. We shall now discuss how the female whore archetype accepts and uses the power of her charms against men. In Woman at Point Zero the narrator depicts a male society that pursues women solely for sex. The author portrays males as

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<sup>127</sup> el Saadawi. Woman at Point Zero. p.74

<sup>128</sup> de Beauvoir, Simone. The Second Sex. New York: Vintage Books, 1973.

people who will pay any amount to indulge their sexual fantasies with a prostitute. Thus the female prostitute gains status and respect by learning to play the game of men.

The image of the prostitute gained much prominence in Arab literature in mid-twentieth century. The choice of the prostitute was pioneered by Taufiq al-Hakim and Naguib Mahfouz. Writers such as Yusuf Idris, Nawal el Saadawi and Salwa Bakr make use of the whore image

consistently in their texts. Various types of prostitutes are depicted in Arab literature. The first is the —hapless harlot. Under this category, a female is forced into prostitution by poverty and misfortune. She like Ihsan in New Cairo is a victim of social and economic circumstances.

Mahfouz's texts abound with such hapless harlots. The second type of whore is the seduced and abandoned female. This female, after losing her virginity, chooses prostitution. An example of such a character is Riri in Mahfouz's Autumn Quail. She elopes with her boyfriend to the city but he later abandons her. She turns to prostitution to survive. There is also the *femme fatale* who uses her body to earn money and social status. A female who chooses this type is happy for a short while and then suffers.<sup>129</sup> Firdaus is one example. Female authors like el Saadawi and Salwa consistently depict the female who turns to prostitution as a result of suffering sexual, verbal or physical abuse.

Research has shown that females who have been abused easily get into prostitution. Shyann Child states,

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<sup>129</sup> Horn, Pierre L. and Mary Beth Pringle. The Image of the Prostitute in Modern Literature. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1984.

Childhood correlates of later prostitution have been well documented. Investigations of women who prostitute themselves on the streets have revealed systematic (and life-long) patterns of abuse, exploitation and degradation at the hands of men, including fathers, brothers, intimate partners, clients and pimps. (p.344)

With this background information we will trace how el Saadawi depicts the female in the class of the whore who chooses prostitution as a medium of rebellion because of abuse. In Woman at Point Zero, Firdaus becomes a prostitute precisely because of her experiences. She falls prey to sexual abuse at a very young age from her uncle.

My *galabeya* often slipped up my thighs, but I paid no attention until when I would glimpse my uncle's hand moving slowly... up my thigh with a cautious, stealthy, trembling movement.... He was doing to me what Mohammadain had done to me before. In fact, he was doing even more... (p.13)

This abuse continues and stops just before her uncle gets married. In marriage, she is sexually, verbally and physically abused by her husband. She escapes and is taken in by Bayoumi, a coffee house attendant; he also later sexually abuses her and locks her in a room where he and his friends take turns to sexually abuse her;

He took to locking me in the flat before going out. I now slept on the floor in the other room. He would come back in the middle of the night, pull the cover away from me, slap my face, and then bear down on me with all his weight... Then one night his body seemed heavier than before, and his breath smelt different, so I opened my eyes. The face above me was not Bayoumi's. (p.53)

A female neighbour helps her to escape but she falls prey to a *Madame* who finally turns her into a prostitute. According to Flowers (2001), a female who has experienced abuse is extremely vulnerable to the charisma of a pimp or *Madame* who plays the friend role to the needy girl. This is the role Sharifa Salah el Dine plays in Firdaus' life after she escapes Bayoumi. She escapes again after realising that Sharifa is making money out of her. Before escaping, she learns to value and price herself. Sharifa tells Firdaus:



...you failed to value yourself highly enough. A man does not know a woman's worth, Firdaus. She is the one who determines her value. The higher you price yourself, the more he will realize what you are really worth, and be prepared to pay with the means at his disposal. And if he has no means, he will steal from someone else to give you what you demand. (p.58)

She escapes Sharifa with the intention of finding work with her secondary school certificate but is perceived as a prostitute by a police officer because she walks alone on the street at night.

Even her explanation does not change his mind. —You're a prostitute, and it's my duty to arrest you, and others of your kind. To clean the country, and protect respectable families from the likes of you! (p.67). Ironically that same society encourages prostitution, clearly demonstrated by the state requiring Firdaus to perform her 'patriotic' duty by sleeping with a visiting head of state to strengthen bilateral links between both countries. —...He explained to me that refusing a Head of State could be looked upon 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 was a patriot, I would go to him at once! (p.98). Thus, it is the system he seeks to protect that has made prostitution possible.

However, prostitutes view their *profession* differently. The following is an extract of the conversation among some prostitutes in Two Women in One at the police station:

—When will God have mercy on us?  
—God is pleased with us all right.  
—I feel better now.  
—Without us honourable husbands would have died and respectable households might have collapsed. —But they hate our smell...  
—Because it's their real smell.  
—And they put us in prison.  
—Because we know what their genitals look like.  
—They're scared to death of us.  
—And they die of desire for us. (p.93-94)

The banter here is very effective in bringing out the hypocrisies in society as seen in the paradox of the last two sentences. It is rather ironic that it is immorality that ensures that society's charade

of honour is maintained. It satirises society's double standards. Prostitutes view their job as important in protecting marriages. In fact, Gerda Lerner notes, —As the sexual regulation of women of the propertied class became more firmly entrenched, the virginity of respectable daughters became a financial asset for the family. Thus, commercial prostitution came to be seen as a social necessity for meeting the sexual needs of men.<sup>130</sup> Thus the male who cries for purity leads the female into prostitution and holds her there. Although the male marries only a virgin, it is the active sexuality of the whore that attracts him<sup>131</sup> and perhaps fulfils his sexual fantasies. Prostitution has been made possible by the great sexual freedom given males although the whore is viewed as a deviant. —Affording males greater sexual freedom than females implies the dichotomization of women into two classes – the ‘bad women’ with whom men can enjoy this greater freedom, and the ‘good women’ whose reputability is thereby maintained.<sup>132</sup>

The policeman who arrests Firdaus sexually abuses her and abandons her. She is considered a prostitute because she walks the street unveiled and improperly clothed. —Unveiled women are chastized as prostitutes or ‘Massu’s whores’ who have reneged on their Islamic cultural heritage...<sup>133</sup> When a man gives Firdaus ten Egyptian pounds after having sex with her, she decides to walk the street as a prostitute to earn money. She quickly establishes herself and ceases to walk the streets. Reflecting on her condition, she once says,

How many were the years of my life that went by before my body and myself became really mine, to do with as I wished? ...Now I could decide on the food I wanted to eat, the house I preferred to live in, refuse the man for whom I felt an aversion no matter what the reason, and choose the man

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<sup>130</sup> Liggins, Emma. —Prostitution and Social Purity in the 1880s and 1890s. In Critical Survey. Vol. 15, No. 3. Berghahn: 2003. pp. 39-55

<sup>131</sup> *ibid*

<sup>132</sup> Schur, Edwin M. Labelling Women Deviant: Gender, Stigma and Social Control. New York: McGraw-Hill Inc., 1984. p.164

<sup>133</sup> Ouedghiri, p.42

I wished to have, even if it was only because he was clean and well-manicured. A quarter of a century had passed, for I was twenty-five years old when I started to have a clean apartment of my own, overlooking the main street, engage a cook that prepared the meal I ordered, and employ someone to arrange my appointments at the hours which suited me, and in accordance with the terms which I considered acceptable. My bank account kept mounting all the time. I now had free time in which I could relax, go for walks, or the theatre, time to read the newspapers and to discuss politics with the few close friends I selected from the many who hovered around me seeking to strike up friendship. (p.74)

Firdaus sums up the lot of the Arab female in her opening remark in the extract. The female's body and herself as illustrated by Firdaus' life do not belong to her but first to her father and then her husband. She cannot decide what to eat, where to live and who she has sexual relations with. Prostitution in the experience of Firdaus becomes a better option as it gives the female her liberty. Since she is financially independent she is able to employ others to work for her and has the liberty to mingle and strike up friendships. The juxtaposition of Firdaus' life as the virgin archetype and whore archetype draws the sympathy of readers to her choice to become a prostitute. It also jolts readers' conscience. Clearly, her earnings as a prostitute provide her with a comfortable life and independence. She is the master of her own life, unlike the female virgin.

She has absolute authority over her servants, and in making decisions regarding the household.<sup>134</sup> Her —freedom‖ is further illustrated by her ability to choose who to render her services to.

A man came up to me and whispered. I looked him straight in the eye and said 'No.' Another man came up to me and muttered something in a secretive voice which could barely be heard. I examined him from head to toes and said, 'No.' He enquired: 'Why not?' I replied there are plenty of men and I want to choose with whom to go.' (p.73)

Her success as a prostitute lies in her prerogative to choose her *clients*. She falls within the domain of —Indoor prostitutes [who] waited quietly for men to come to them, placed a higher value on

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<sup>134</sup> Shah, Shalini. —Literature from the Seventh to the Thirteenth Centuries In the Business of Kama: Prostitution in Classical Sanskrit‖ The Medieval History Journal. 2002. p.128-29 <http://mhj.sagepub.com/content/5/1/121>



"respect," "dignity," and "deference," and sought independent accumulation.<sup>135</sup> The art of prostitution becomes a profession; she is the *femme fatale* who uses her body to earn money.

Her *clientele* comes to include important men.

A prostitute always says yes, and then names her price. If she says no she ceases to be a prostitute. I was not a prostitute in the full sense of the word, so from time to time I said no. As a result my price kept going up....

I became a very successful prostitute. I was paid the highest price, and even men of great importance competed for my favours. One day a very important personality from a foreign state heard about me....

My refusal made him even more intent on gaining a victory over me. Every day he would send me a man from the police, and each time this man would try a different approach. But I continued to refuse. 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 upon as an insult to a great man and led to strained relations between the two countries. (p.97-98)

Such a prostitute not only has independence but also gains recognition from even high authorities who call on her to perform —national duties. The insistence of the authorities to conquer her shows their recognition of her individuality and her worth. Her experience as a prostitute also proves that although society frowns on females having sexual experience before marriage, it is the experienced sexual female who fulfils the sexual fantasies of men. Existing contradictions in society are thus portrayed by el Saadawi when Firdaus is adjudged an honourable woman by a court of law. This situation is reinforced by Firdaus' words:

On one occasion they put me in prison because I turned down one of these important men. So I hired a very big lawyer, for a very big sum of money. Shortly after, I was released from gaol without charges. The court decided I was an honourable woman. Now I had learnt that honour required large sums of money to protect it, but that large sums of money could not be obtained without losing one's honour. (p.99)

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<sup>135</sup> Gilfoyle, Timothy J. —Prostitutes in History: From Parables of Pornography to Metaphors of Modernity| The American Historical Review. Oxford University Press, Vol. 104, No. 1, Feb. 1999. pp. 117-141

Firdaus uses cynicism and tongue in cheek to present honour in the Arab society. El Saadawi through her chastises the hypocrisy of society. She reduces honour to more or less trash, and depicts Arab society's values as hollow. If honour can be bought then it ceases to be honour. Honour then is a commodity that can be purchased with money. Society's measures to ensure —honour can apply solely to the poor which signifies the double standards in society. The fact that Firdaus is imprisoned because she refuses to offer her services is an indictment of society.

To further prove that honour is bought, her nobility is further enhanced by her charity work.

One day, when I donated some money to a charitable association, the newspapers published pictures of me and sang my praises as the model of a citizen with a sense of civic responsibility. And so from then on, whenever I needed a dose of honour or fame, I had only to draw some money from the bank. (p.100)

Satire is used here to further ridicule the ambivalence in society's value system. Money becomes a symbol that makes one honourable and famous. Money equals power which in turn equals honour. Consequently, though prostitution is abhorred by society, money is not. Firdaus has perhaps *become* one of the men as a man's honour is dependent on how much money he has. El Saadawi's portrayal of the hypocrisy in society comes out clearly in this episode.

From the foregoing discussion, it might appear that prostitution is a better choice for the female to assert her individuality and earn respectability. Through Firdaus, el Saadawi depicts prostitution as being better than restricting oneself to the servitude of marriage. She considers the prostitute to be the least deluded among women.

All women are prostitutes of one kind or the other. Because I was intelligent I preferred to be a free prostitute, rather than an enslaved wife. Every time I gave my body I charged the highest price. I could employ any number of servants to wash my clothes and clean my shoes, hire a lawyer no matter how expensive to defend my honour, pay a doctor for an abortion, buy a journalist to publish my pictures and write something about me in the

newspapers. The more respectable the profession, the higher the salary, and a person's price goes up as he climbs the social ladder. (p.99)

The narrator here sees all women as serving men: one type as a —slave and the other as a free individual. A wife is considered —honourable but is not free, having been deprived of the right to choose. The prostitute on the other hand, though despised openly by society, is secretly patronised by men; she is free to choose who becomes her slave or servant with the money she makes. The term —an enslaved wife aptly describes Firdaus' experience and that of Zakeya in God Dies by the Nile and other women. Since her body had been taken advantage of by males without her consent, she comes to see prostitution as liberating, and a respectable profession. The narrator draws readers' attention to the consequences of maintaining double standards. When money becomes the determining factor for honour then dishonour becomes honour for those who have money. She accepts prostitution by withdrawing into herself —...like some passive, lifeless thing, refusing to surrender, undefeated. Its passivity was a form of resistance, a strange ability not to feel either pleasure or pain, not to let a single hair on my head, or on my body, be moved (p.102).

However, the whore archetype reaches its peak not in prostitution but in murdering male figures who are representative of patriarchy. El Saadawi depicts this in both Woman at Point Zero and God Dies by the Nile. Firdaus in Woman at Point Zero discovers that prostitution does not offer the ultimate independence she seeks when she is approached by a pimp. She also discovers that the pimp is protected by law while she is not. When she is abused by Marzouk, she kills him.

...he lifted his arms up in the air and slapped me. I raised my hand even higher than he had done, and brought it violently on his face. The whites of his eyes went red. His hand started to reach for the knife in his pocket, but my hand was quicker than his. I raised the knife and buried it deep in his neck, pulled it out of his neck and then thrust it deep into his chest and pulled it out of his chest and plunged it deep into his belly. I stuck the knife into almost every part of his body. (p.105)



The female's freedom is totally achieved when she gathers the courage to confront the male who abuses her and stands in her way. By eliminating the predator, the prey is free. Firdaus recognises the root of her problem as patriarchy and kills the male representative of patriarchy. Each stab of the pimp is a strike at a system that keeps the female perpetually enslaved. The image of violence is used to illustrate how the female can deal with her abuser. Zakeya, in also recognising men as symbols of patriarchy and patriarchy's ferociousness, kills the mayor in God Dies by the Nile. She claims the mayor represents Allah and by killing him, she puts an end to male dominance and brutality enforced by patriarchal religious notions. Talking to a prisoner, she says: — I know who it is... I know it's Allah, my child... I buried him there on the bank of the Nile' (p.175). Zakeya's assertion is an abomination bordering on blasphemy, a very serious crime in Islam and punishable by death. Zakeya, hitherto a religious woman, finds solace in knowing that she had murdered and buried Allah, who is the —cause of all her woes. The trauma she endures as a woman and her family's predicament make her utter these blasphemous words. These murders symbolise the consequences of using religion as a medium to exploit and abuse.

Both Firdaus and Zakeya are arrested for murder. Firdaus refuses to write an appeal to the President to reduce her sentence:

I was the only woman who had torn the mask away, and exposed the face of their ugly reality. They condemned me to death not because I killed a man... because they are afraid to let me live. They know that as long as I am alive they will not be safe, that I shall kill them. My life means their death. My death means their death. They want to live. And life for them means more crime, more plunder, unlimited booty. I have triumphed over both life and death because I no longer desire to live, nor do I any longer fear to die. I want nothing. I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. Therefore I am free. For during life it is our wants, our hopes, our fears that enslave us. (p.110)

Thus the female whose archetype is one who does not conform to what is traditionally perceived as female. She revolts against traditional norms and roles prescribed by religion and culture. She

does not accept male dominance and control. She, like Bahiah, takes control of her destiny and gets actively involved in politics. The quest for independence leads her sometimes to engage in prostitution. In prostitution she apparently gains control over her body and lives comfortably.

But the illusion of freedom is short-lived as she is brought under control by a pimp or the state.

Firdaus' position that all females are prostitutes serves to bridge the gap between the virgin and whore classes; highlights the objectification of the female, and universalises the subjugation of females. The female as represented by el Saadawi, especially, gains ultimate freedom when she kills her abuser and oppressor who symbolises patriarchy. This last stage is reached by both Firdaus and Zakeya. Such whores are given two options by el Saadawi: imprisonment (Zakeya) or execution (Firdaus). Thus the Arab world is depicted as utterly against the non-conformist women who it labels as —whore, yet creates conditions that makes the existence of whores possible.

In this chapter, we examined both Matar and el Saadawi's treatment of the whore archetype in Arab literature. The female who attempts to assert her individuality, contrary to accepted cultural, religious and social standards, is labelled a whore, and is hunted into forced marriages or ostracised and pushed into prostitution. In the next chapter, we will examine the consequences and limitations of the categorisation of women in the Arab world painted by el Saadawi and

Matar in their selected novels.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Limitations and Effects**

The previous chapters have dealt with how el Saadawi and Matar have structured the virginwhore dichotomy into their novels. We have analysed the female virgin archetype and the prescriptions that she must conform to in the Maghreb Arab world represented realistically in the selected novels. The female whore archetype has also been dealt with. We have discovered that the female who conforms to the status quo and lives within the accepted cultural and religious norms is perceived as a virgin. However the female who rejects the status quo and asserts her independence is deemed a whore. In this chapter we will discuss limitations of both classes of females. We will examine the psyche of females and analyse how various forms of subjugation and abuse affect them. In our analysis of the female virgin archetype we highlighted the various forms of abuse suffered by females in the quest of fulfilling requirements in order to conform to what is traditionally perceived as femaleness. What we seek to do in this chapter is to go beyond classification, the identification of abuse and the subjugation of the female to analyse how they are psychologically and emotionally affected by their varying experiences and how these are depicted in prose. This will throw more light on the situation of the female generally and, in a way, bring to light the male situation in the Arab world. In other words, this analysis will not only bring out the limitations but also the effects of categorisation on both males and females due to the patriarchal roles prescribed for them by culture and religion in the world created in the selected novels.

We have discussed spatial boundary and its relation to the female in Chapters One and Two. Spatial boundary is significantly used in relation to the biological and social performance of virginity, which restricts the female and serves as a tool to subjugate and prevent her from finding and being



her true self. Although spatial boundary is viewed as necessary to ensure the protection of men from the *fitna* of women so they can focus on Allah, it only serves to widen the gap between the sexes. Mernissi (1975) observes that —A woman in a traditionally male space upsets Allah's order by inciting men to commit *zina*. The man has everything to lose in this encounter: peace of mind, self-determination, allegiance to Allah, and social prestige (p.144). Thus the lack of other modes of interaction between the sexes reduces their relations to only sexual encounters. Consequently, the female is perceived only in terms of her body and the dangers she poses to man and his worship of Allah. Spatial boundary then restricts the female not only physically but spiritually. She is not given the same access to Allah as the man and must worship in a separate room. This separation of the sexes even in worship encodes all other aspects of their interactions in society. The female is, as a result, seen as the *other*, thus the enemy, who must be kept away to ensure that Allah's order is kept and man fulfils his religious obligations.

The system of segregation serves the needs of the male by establishing his *superior* status and the female's *inferiority*. This is much like the class system in capitalism where the bourgeoisies depict themselves as superior to peasants or the workers they employ. Capitalism puts systems in place to ensure this division of power much like segregation. According to feminism, on the other hand, the superiority of the male to the female has erroneously been arrived at through patriarchal influence on culture and religion. Even though many Muslim women view seclusion as a source of pride, it limits their roles to daughter, sister, wife and mother and offers no room for the female to be an individual. Also, although spatial boundary is to serve as a protection to the honour of the female, this has been proven otherwise by the texts under study. Even though the female is restricted to the domestic sphere and as a result has limited interactions with only close male

relatives, her honour is still soiled. According to el Saadawi (1980), male relatives constitute danger for the female. Research has shown that

Tragically, children, and particularly girls, are most often abused by someone they know and trust. For example, family members and acquaintances are responsible for almost 90 per cent of child rapes. Older relatives, brothers, and the child's own father or stepfather are the leading abusers of girls within the family...<sup>136</sup>

Firdaus is abused by her uncle although she is restricted and forbidden from going out to the field and from playing with boys of her age. The female is abused because she has been reduced to a body by which —...she is being perceived not in terms of her individual personhood, but in a way that dehumanizes her, strips her of her identity, reduces her to her body, or even just parts of her body (Crawford, 2006). Her objectification makes her neither safe with relatives nor from other male predators. In using a character like Firdaus the narrator highlights the falsehood of the protection in segregation. Behind this lies

...the Qur'anic concept of sex—the word *farj*—denotes merely 'vagina' in modern usage. Woman has become the totality of *farj* because *farj* is an opening and signifies fragility, that is, a lack. Evidently, this negative meaning became mechanically linked to the woman as a result of the subjection of the Arab mind to a patriarchal logic that is predicated on considering the female a lacking being, and therefore on diminishing the woman and belittling her.<sup>137</sup>

When the female is reduced to a body, abuse is inevitable. However, most abusers are not punished because a family's honour is tightly linked to the hymen of its females. In order to save face and keep intact a family's honour, the incident is not reported and in most cases the girl is blamed for bringing it onto herself. Consequently, abused women and girls do not report their experiences because of the fear of being shamed and blamed. According to Schur (1996), raped victims are treated as though they were deviant themselves. Rape is prevalent in communities that keep sex

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<sup>136</sup> Crawford, Mary. *Transformation: Women, Gender and Psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006. P.185

<sup>137</sup> Dialmy, Abdessamad and Allon J. Uhlmann. —Sexuality in Contemporary Arab Society. | *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice*. Vol. 49, No.2 (Summer 2005). pp. 16-33

shrouded in secrecy and a taboo subject. It is interesting that because of the segregation of the sexes in the Arab world, it is not only the female who is at risk of rape. In God Dies by the Nile, Haj Ismail, the village guard is a victim of homosexual rape. As an adult he recounts his experience:

His mind went back to a time when he was only ten. His cousin Youssef was older and stronger than him. He had arms and legs covered in hair, and the muscles of his thighs looked like a swelling under his skin. When he saw them first time he was seized with fright, and tried to run away, but his cousin had locked the door and there was no escape. He dodged this way and that, but Youssef caught him in an iron grip holding him by the back of his neck, threw him to the ground face downwards and wrenched his *galabeya* up over his buttocks. He felt the powerful, heavy body press down on him... (p.65-66)

The language reflects the forceful brutality and violence as well as the oppressive nature of rape. This is depicted through the use of expressions like —...an iron grip holding him... threw him to the ground face downwards and wrenched his *galabeya*... the powerful, heavy body press down on him....<sup>138</sup> Haj Ismail cannot forget this event as it scars him for life. In both Woman at Point Zero and God Dies by the Nile, the female, in the characters of Firdaus and Nefissa, Zeinab and Zakeya, is not spared either. With the above scenario, we will now focus on the consequences of the abuse on the victim's psyche and how it affects and shapes their lives.

According to the World Health Organization, —gender-linked forms of violence share an underlying cause: \_the lower social status of women and the belief that women are the property of men'...<sup>138</sup> Hence both sexual and physical abuse of females are based on this premise. Firdaus is reduced to her body; she is therefore portrayed as a prostitute because she walks alone on the street at night. She is not believed when she draws the attention of a policeman to the fact that she is in

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<sup>138</sup> Crawford, p.53



search of a job with her secondary school certificate. The narrator successfully shifted attention from her mind to her body as the policeman fails to recognise her certificate. She is thus not given the opportunity to use her intellect but is reduced to using her body to earn a living. This is brought to the fore through the actions of the policeman and Bayoumi who rape her and prevent her from searching for a job. Therefore when Bahiah and Najwa are taken out of school and married off, their bodies are in effect deemed more important than their minds. This consequently limits the horizon of the female and successfully restricts her to the domestic sphere with no hope of actively participating in religion and the polity. Jeanette Treiber in —Feminism and Identity Politics: Mariama Bâ's *Un Chant écarlaté*<sup>139</sup> notes that —it is precisely the exclusion from education and discourse that has kept women in vulnerable and exploitative positions.¶

Also, Zakeya (*God Dies by the Nile*) consistently suffers sexual and physical abuse which severely affects her psyche. Sigmund Freud asserts that sexual abuse or other traumatic experiences can lead to neurosis.<sup>140</sup> Though Freud's theory has contributed profoundly to neurosis and its treatment, and despite his significant contribution to psychoanalysis, his theories on the female have received much criticism. His theory on hysteria in women was propounded based on his interactions with and treatment of a mentally unstable girl who he named, Dora. Despite the scientific limitations of this theory, it greatly influenced psychoanalysis and the study of the female mind. Also his reassessment of the differences between the sexes is one that has received much backlash. He concludes that —anatomy is destiny¶ and asserts the female's passivity even

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<sup>139</sup> Treiber, Jeanette. —Feminism and Identity Politics: Mariama Bâ's *Un Chant écarlaté*.¶ Research in African Studies. Indiana UP, 1996.

<sup>140</sup> Felluga, Dino. "Modules on Freud: On Neuroses." Introductory Guide to Critical Theory. 17<sup>th</sup> July, 2013. <http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/freud4.html>

though these cannot be scientifically proved. Although he observes that

Science... tells you something that runs counter to your expectation... It draws your attention to the fact that portions of the male sexual apparatus also appear in women's bodies, though in an atrophied state, and viceversa in the alternative case. It regards their occurrence as indications of bisexuality as though an individual is not a man or a woman but always both – merely a certain amount more than the other.<sup>141</sup>

From his own observations in the extract above, science is unable to describe masculinity and femininity as each sex depicts traits of the other; thus anatomy cannot be destiny. Also in —Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes‖ (1925) he takes a different stance with the question of castration. Rather than see the female sexual organ as unique, he chooses to see it in the light of the penis thus concluding that the female is consumed by what he terms 'penis envy'. His analysis inevitably makes the female inferior and lacking which cannot be proved by science. A critical look at his submissions shows a close link between his patriarchal notions on manhood and femaleness and his theories. They are thus only reflections of his culture's perceptions about the female.

Erickson on the other hand argues that —anatomy, history and personality combine to form one's destiny‖<sup>142</sup> which is more probable. Also Linton notes that

All societies prescribe different attitudes and activities to men and to women. Most try to rationalize these prescriptions in terms of the physiological differences between the sexes or their different roles in reproduction. However, a comparative study of the statuses ascribed to women and men in different cultures seems to show that while such factors may have served as a starting point for the development of a division, the actual prescriptions are almost entirely determined by culture. Even the psychological characteristics ascribed to men and to women in different societies vary so much that they can have little physiological basis.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Freud, Sigmund. New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis. College edition. NY: 1965. p.114.

<sup>142</sup> Erickson, E.H. Identity: Youth and Crisis. New York: Norton, 1968. Quoted by Jean H. Block in Sex Role Identity and Ego Development. London: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1984. p.2

<sup>143</sup> Linton, Ralph. The Study of Man. London, 1936. p.16.

Masculinity and femininity and the traits associated with them are therefore dependent on society and culture. Anatomy therefore does not define the personality or traits associated with the sexes, for the male can grow to be passive and submissive while the female can be strong and rational if they are socialised as such.

Turning our attention back to the link between abuse and neurosis, Zakeya and Najwa suffer from this condition. Zakeya becomes neurotic as she relives memories of the sexual and physical abuse she suffers from her spouse. These, coupled with her son's recruitment into the military, her niece Nefissa's disappearance and her brother's arrest cause her to lose her mind. Zeinab, her niece remarks; —...Zakeya is sick. She no longer eats, nor drinks, nor does she even sleep. All the time she sees things and hears voices, and it makes her very frightened (p.99). Although a ritual is performed to chase out the evil spirits tormenting her, the family does not get the expected results. The whole of the town participates in this ritual. She is sprayed with chicken blood. Both men and women spray every part of her body with the blood. She is also encouraged to scream out the evil spirits;

She opened her mouth wide and started to scream and to wail in a continuous high-pitched lament, as though mourning the suffering of a whole lifetime suppressed in her body from the very first moment in her life when her father struck her mother on the head because she had not borne him the son he expected. It was a wail that went back... To the time when Om Saber forced her thighs apart and with her razor cut off a piece of her flesh. To the time when she developed two breasts which the menfolk would pinch when there was no one around to prevent them. To the time when her spouse Abdel Moneim would beat her with his stick, then climb on top of her and bear down on her chest with all his weight. To the time when she bore him children and bled, then buried them one after the other... (p.95)

The parallel structures,

To the time when Om Saber forced her thighs apart and with her razor cut off a piece of her flesh. To the time when she developed two breasts which



the menfolk would pinch... To the time when her spouse Abdel Moneim would beat her with his stick.... To the time when she bore him children and bled, then buried them one after the other...

in this extract foreground the image of abuse and pain. This is to realistically depict the female situation and bring out the intensity of the misery she has to endure right from childhood. Readers are jolted into coming face to face with the brutal reality of the female condition and incite them to act. It is apparent from the above extract that Zakeya's ailment is psychological rather than spiritual, hence the failure of the ritual to purge her of the evil spirits.

This ritual is similar to the *hadra* described by Evelyn Accad in Wounding Words: A Woman's Journal in Tunisia. The *hadra* is performed in a shrine on the mad and neurotic. —The sheikh shakes the possessed to make the demons leave. He speaks to the djinns to exorcise them and orders them to leave those they inhabit. He spits when the evil spirit has left to purify those who are ill and walks on [their]... body to ensure that the devil has really left.<sup>144</sup> All of those treated, except one, are female. The *hadra* requires that the sheikh should throw the possessed onto the floor and walk on her body and smear her face with his saliva. Both the *hadra* and the ritual performed for Zakeya do not provide a remedy to the neurotic conditions of women.

These rituals further serve to torture women more, as in the process of seeking healing they are abused. When the ritual does not work Haj Ismail instructs Zeinab, her niece, to take Zakeya to Sayeda Zeinab (a mosque built in memory of Zeinab, the Prophet Mohammad's daughter) where she is to beg for forgiveness from Allah. What Haj Ismail fails to recognise is that Zakeya is not

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<sup>144</sup> Accad, 1996. p.68

being punished for her sins but rather she has become neurotic because of her experiences of sexual and physical abuse as well as the exploitation of her family by the Mayor.

To depict how common neurosis is among females, Zakeya and Zeinab, on their way to Sayeda Zeinab, meet an old man with his young wife. The old man says,

She was in good health, but I don't know what happened to her. Almost overnight she started to refuse all food and drink, stayed awake all night, unable to sleep, and got into the habit of talking to herself. She sees things, and screams out in the middle of the night. (p.104)

The old man is advised to take her to the house of Allah to be forgiven her sins and the evil spirits driven from her body. This image of the young wife aptly serves the narrative purpose of depicting how female genital mutilation, sexual and physical abuse, and the subjugation of women greatly affect them psychologically resulting in neurosis. A recent study concludes that females who suffer various forms of abuse are more prone to depression and other psychological and physical problems. The researchers conclude that the effects of sexual abuse last for years.<sup>145</sup>

The female in search of a spiritual antidote for her psychological ailment falls prey to the male: religion is used as a tool to exploit her further. It is rather ironic that Haj Ismail instructs Zeinab to take her aunt to Sayeda Zeinab with the sole purpose of taking advantage of them, that is to satisfy the whims of the mayor. At Sayeda Zeinab they are told by a man, they presumed was a Sheikh, that she is indeed possessed by evil spirits which will leave only if they do as instructed.

She is sick because you have continued to disobey Allah and she has encouraged you to do that. But Allah... will forgive both of you on condition that you obey, and do as He asks of you....

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<sup>145</sup> Raymond, Joan. "Effects of sexual abuse last for decades, study finds." 6/30/2011  
[http://www.nbcnews.com/id/43594639/ns/health-health\\_care/t/effects-sexual-abuse-last-decades-studyfinds/#.Ufvqu5JM-M4](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/43594639/ns/health-health_care/t/effects-sexual-abuse-last-decades-studyfinds/#.Ufvqu5JM-M4)

...bathe yourselves with clean water from the Nile, while you wash continue to recite the testimony. Once dressed you should do your prayers.... On the following day... Zeinab is to take another bath with clean water... 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.... During this time Zakeya should lead the buffalo to the field, tie it to the water-wheel, take her hoe and work until noon prayers. (p.115-116)

He further instructs Zakeya on how to pray and what to do after prayers. The man who gives them the instruction has clearly conspired with Haj Ismail and so does not speak for Allah but for him. This depicts how some males under the guise of religion take advantage of and abuse women. Religion is presented here as a tool used in exploiting the female rather than serving the purpose of bridging the gap between Allah and man. The remedy given Zakeya provides only temporary relief for her while it results in Zeinab's abuse by the mayor. Although Zeinab is raped by the mayor, she accepts this as the will of Allah as it was Allah who instructed her to go to his house. It is rather doubtful that a pure Allah will give such an instruction; it is only a ploy to exploit and abuse them but Zakeya and Zeinab do not question this arrangement mainly because of their ignorance, illiteracy and blind reverence of religious authority.

Najwa (In the Country of Men) suffers psychologically when she is thrust into the roles of wife and mother when just a child herself. Since rape is defined as —...sexual penetration without the person's consent, obtained through force or threat of harm, or when the person is incapable of giving consent...|| (Crawford, p.269), we can conclude that she is raped by her husband on the night of her defloration. She relives the experience throughout the story. Although she does not wish to have sex with her husband, she is obligated to do so. The narrator recounts:

Something seemed to wake me that night and take me to their room.



Baba's bedside lamp was the only light on... I saw him on top of her... She lay beneath him, unmoving, looking away... One of her arms lay stretched beside her, the hand open and slack toward the sky. He moaned a strange moan... Then suddenly he froze, his back stiff and shuddering, before he fell on one side... turning away from him. She cleared her throat, said, 'Turn off the light, I told you to turn off the light.'

...something about what I saw disturbed me so deeply that I couldn't imagine how God's Seat, His Great Throne, didn't shudder as my heart.  
(p.86-87)

This narrative by nine year old, Suleiman gives quite a disturbing picture of the parents having sex. Even at his age he is able to recognize his mother's passive reaction to the sexual act. The choice to use a child narrator is very successful as it draws readers to critically look at, and question, sex in forced marriages. The narrative hits us and shows how serious and pathetic the female situation is. Because the female becomes the property of her husband in marriage, Najwa is forbidden by tradition to reject her husband sexually. Due to this she is unable to sleep with Faraj, her husband in the same bed overnight. —She never spent the night here when Baba was home... the excuse Mama gave for sleeping on the sofa... (p.84) was that Faraj snores but even her nine year old son does not believe this. We are informed that —Some nights she started in her room but in the morning I would find her pillow and blanket in the sitting room, her shape within them, an ashtray beside her full of crumpled tissue paper! (p.85). After sex with him, she moves to the living room where she cries herself to sleep. Her inability to deal with this traumatic situation is what causes her to become an alcoholic and a chain smoker. Studies show a great link between alcohol abuse, smoking, and sexual abuse.<sup>146</sup> Thus, the female is affected psychologically and becomes suicidal when she is forced into marriage. We will discuss this further later in the chapter.

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<sup>146</sup> —Long-Term Consequences of Child Abuse and Neglect. | Child Welfare Information Gateway [https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/long\\_term\\_consequences.cfm](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/long_term_consequences.cfm) 5<sup>th</sup> August, 2013.

The threat of sexual and physical abuse does not change much for females who work outside the domestic sphere. Girls who work as domestic servants are raped by their masters or masters' sons. This is illustrated in God Dies by the Nile. The mayor, a sex predator, uses his position to sexually abuse his female servants, and remarks; \_—How exciting these simple girls are, and how pleasant it is to take their virgin bodies into one's arms, like plucking a newly opened rose flower! (p.120). His cynicism reflects the Arab society of the world of the texts under study. His son also participates in abusing their female servants. Socialisation, Schur observes, is to be blamed for male aggressiveness and abuse of women.<sup>147</sup> The female is harassed in her work place by superiors as well as colleagues because she has transgressed the male boundary space.<sup>148</sup> As a result

Women's increasing encroachment into traditionally male spaces greatly intensifies the sexual aspect of any encounter between men and women... When women go to work they are not only trespassing in the universe of the *umma* but are also competing with their former masters, men... (Mernissi, p.146)

Since the female is perceived as a foe, her intrusion and competition with men for scarce jobs are reacted to harshly. Islamic fundamentalists capitalise on this, using barbaric measures to send the female back to the domestic sphere.<sup>149</sup> In Woman at Point Zero, Firdaus depicts how female civil servants are forced to sleep with their superiors for promotions, and to keep their jobs. Education and the *liberty* to intrude into the *umma* does not necessarily elevate the female from her subordinate role and perceived inferiority as she is still considered as lacking. Dialmy and Allon observe that,

all traditional Arab cultural regimes concur in considering the sexual order both binary and hierarchical at one and the same time. This order revolves around two poles: one pole, which is superior, active, and dominating, is

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<sup>147</sup> Schur, Edwin M. Labelling Women Deviant: Gender, Stigma and Social Control. New York: McGraw-Hill Inc., 1984. p.157

<sup>148</sup> Mernissi, 1975. p.146

<sup>149</sup> Ouedghiri, Meryem. —Writing Women's bodies on the Palimpsest of Islamic History: Fatima Mernissi and Assia Djebar. In Cultural Dynamics. 2002. p.42

made up of men, and the other pole, which is inferior and passive, is made up of wives, children, slaves, homosexuals, and prostitutes. One of the fundamental characteristics of this asymmetrical polarity between the single sexual active and the multiple sexual passives is the construction of all sexual passives in the image of the woman.<sup>150</sup>

The female is thus educated to be passive and docile as these are the desirable traits in the traditional woman.

Education of the female children is therefore transformed into a slow process of annihilation, a gradual throttling of her personality and mind, leaving intact only the outside shell, the body a lifeless mould of muscle and bone and blood that moves like a wound-up rubber doll.

A girl who has lost personality, her personality, her capacity to think independently and to use her own mind, will do what others have told her and will become a toy in their hands... (el Saadawi, 1980. p.22)

The above extract is demonstrated through Bahiah in Two Women in One, who is consistently torn between being who society expects her to be and expressing her individuality. She is portrayed as having a split personality, —...a mental disorder characterized by at least two distinct and relatively enduring identities or dissociated personality states that alternately control a person's behaviour, and is accompanied by memory impairment for important information not explained by ordinary forgetfulness (Wikipedia). Although this does not fully explain Bahiah's personality it at least provides a partial answer to her dilemma. She is consistently torn between being who her family and society perceive her to be, and pursuing being her real self. This plunges her mind into confusion. On one hand she is convinced —...that she was definitely not

Bahiah Shaheen (p. 13) and is consistently surprised when she hears her name mentioned: —\_Bahiah!\_ The name sounded as if it belonged to someone else... and when that name was called she would look up in surprise. She might even ask, \_Who's that?\_ She got a shock every time she

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<sup>150</sup> Dialmy, p.17



heard her name...|| (p. 21). This is further affirmed when at a police station she refuses to answer to her name;

‘Are you Bahiah Shaheen?’ Still laughing, she looked up with her usual arrogance and replied ‘No!’...Bahiah Shaheen!’ She realized he was calling someone else, so she did not reply. But he called out once more, still louder: ‘Bahiah Shaheen!’ She looked around searching among the faces for someone called Bahiah Shaheen. She could not recognize her face among the women standing or sitting on the floor. (p.92-3)

On the other hand —a hidden certainty told her that... she was still Bahiah Shaheen, hardworking, well-behaved medical student, daughter of Muhammad Shaheen...|| (p.22). Indeed the war within her greatly affects her psyche. When asked if she ever cried as a child, she replies —they used to hit me on account of someone else called Bahiah Shaheen, who was obedient and well-behaved|| (p.41). Her disassociation from the personality of Bahiah is consistently recounted by the narrator. Indeed, she admits her hatred for Bahiah Shaheen;

She did not like Bahiah Shaheen. She could see her defects all too clearly. She hated that polite obedient voice. She was irritated by that placid look which did not see things, but allowed them to be reflected from her, like a watery surface. She hated that nose which was not sufficiently upturned. She despised that paleness... (p.37)

This disassociation is also apparent as she loses consciousness of her actions and decisions. Even though she agrees to follow Saleem, she forgets herself. When she comes to herself,

She realised that the regular sound of footsteps on the asphalt came from her own shoes. The sound was familiar, like her name ringing in the air. But her mind no longer trusted her ears. What sounded familiar to her ears became extremely strange to her mind. What had brought her feet to the asphalt of this street? (p.43)

The Arab setting with its dualities makes the creation of such a character realistic and as a result mirrors the situation of other females. The ambivalence of her being is apparent. It is as though another being takes over her body. However, her loss of consciousness and lack of concentration could also be as a result of her desire to know and be her true self. Since she has been taught what

it means to be female she associates her desires that are contrary to the accepted norms of femaleness with a different personality in order to deal with the contradictions. This is illustrated as she talks about taboos and how they reflect the true desires of humanity. Consequently, it is a taboo to be an individual and use one's intellect as a female, hence her disassociation. Crawford (2006) asserts that —...The pressure to conform to an idealized femininity in which good girls are never angry or oppositional leads girls to doubt the truth of their own knowledge and feelings and to feel less positive about themselves (p.192). They arrive at this conclusion through a process called *self-silencing*. This is clearly demonstrated in the case of Bahiah.

These doubts about her knowledge and feelings trap Bahiah in meaninglessness: —everything had the same colour and shape to her. All bodies were similar, and all gestures and voices. She found herself running aimlessly, fleeing the college grounds, fleeing the deadly sameness within and without, inside her body and in the outside world (p.20). The cycle of daily life frustrates her; —today would have been like yesterday, and like tomorrow. She would have fallen back into the whirlpool of everyday life and everyday faces (p.37). She is thus in constant search of someone who would pick her out of the crowd and see her —but the faces were all the same... she felt as if she were drowning alone in a sea of people, unseen and unrecognized... Bahiah, Aliah, Suad and Yvonne — it was all the same. Without thinking, she found herself fleeing the crowds... (p.51). It is this sameness of everything around her and lack of individuality that fuel her desire to annihilate herself. She almost commits suicide by jumping off the Jebel al-

Muqattam mountain.

She was consumed by an overwhelming desire to stop the monotony which took possession of her constantly; a desire to shout, for no reason; to jump through the window and break an arm or a leg, to plunge a kitchen knife into her chest so that she would cry and hear her cries with her own ears and know for certain that she was alive and not dead. She had a strong and

a persistent desire to feel alive to the extent of committing a capital crime.  
(p.48)

The fear of not being able to separate herself from other females makes her suicidal and illustrates her discontentment. It also reflects in her conviction of not being Bahiah Shaheen. This conviction symbolises her desire to be different and to assert her individuality. That is why she is constantly torn between being Bahiah and pursuing her real self. However, as she longs to break free from monotony, the Bahiah created by society and her family holds her back from finding herself. This illustrates how dangerous and far reaching the dualities created in patriarchal societies affect the psyche of the female. These can have dire consequences because although she is taught to be one person her exposure to education and modernity as well as her experiences teach her to be a different person. Exerting her individuality puts her in the class of the whore though it is only in knowing herself as an individual that she can fully and successfully perform her traditional roles. Straightjacketing thus serves as a tool to prevent the female from being her individual self. This severely affects her psyche and development. The virgin-whore dichotomy therefore successfully causes the female not to be treated and seen as an individual and is, as a result, denied the opportunity of asserting her rights. Bahiah's experience depicts how this duality seeks to reduce the female to a body whose only aim is to perform her roles either in the category of the virgin or whore.

Due to the low regard given female education as established in Chapter Two, some of the major characters (Bahiah, Najwa and Firdaus) of the novels under discussion are either taken out of school or denied tertiary education. Education is seen as a medium that corrupts the female yet it is one of the avenues that causes the female to develop and mature. As stated by Mary



Wollstonecraft,<sup>151</sup> education rids the female of the failings that males criticise and point out as weaknesses in her. Education ensures that a husband not only has a body to share his bed with but someone who shares his intellect and stimulates his mind. Courtesans were in high demand in 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe precisely for this reason. Men turned to them to relieve their boredom and to find stimulation for their minds. It is rather surprising that, to the Arab world, education does not have the same effect on the male as the female. This world fails to realise that if education does not corrupt the male, then it cannot possibly corrupt the female. When both sexes cannot intellectually interact with each other what is left but sex since love is also forbidden? Without education the prospects of filling other useful roles aside the traditional feminine roles are very limited.

This results in the female's entrapment. The female's entrapment is portrayed through the image of segregation and denial of education in the Arab world created. The narrator in In the Country of Men discusses this issue through Najwa. —She had always seemed captive, captive in her own home, continually failing to prepare herself for anything else (p.168). She appears captive because she is restricted to their home with nothing to occupy her. She declares that she can no longer read anything longer than a poem or article because as part of her punishment she has been forbidden from reading. The lack of respect for female education, and the misconception that education corrupts females reduce her to only shopping and eating out with her son after nights of drunkenness. The entrapment further affects her psyche especially when she is forced into marriage. In the previous chapters we discussed how Najwa was taken out of school and married off at the age of fourteen for hanging out in mixed company in a coffee house. She is not only married off without her consent but, as part of her punishment, she is not allowed to see the groom

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<sup>151</sup> Wollstonecraft, Mary. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. Ed. Carol H. Poston. New York: Norton, 1975.

nor his photograph until her wedding night. As a result, she comes to view her marriage as a prison. She refers to her wedding day as that —black day. Her apprehension is clear as she waits in a dreary room for the appearance of the groom to deflower her.

„I was so frightened. I ran to the toilet ten times or more.... They didn't know how it felt waiting in that room, where the complete stranger who was now my husband was going to walk in alone and, without introduction, undress me and do filthy, revolting things.‘

„It was a dreary room. It had nothing in it but a huge bed with a square, ironed white handkerchief on one pillow. I had no idea what the handkerchief was for.‘

*„I walked up and down that room in my wedding dress wondering what kind of a face my executioner had. Because that's how I saw it: they passed the judgement and he, the stranger armed with the marriage contract signed by my father, was going to carry out the punishment. When he touches me, which I was sure he was going to do, there will be no point in screaming; I was his right, his wife under God.‘*

... „Those hours seemed eternal. My stomach churned, my fingers were as cold as ice cubes, and my hands wrestled with each other.... When he finally walked in, I fainted. When I came to, he wasn't there.‘ (p.13-14) [italics mine]

The long extract above depicts a vivid picture of the trauma as well as the injustice of the whole marriage process. What is more shocking is that her husband deflowers her although she becomes unconscious. This shows the low regard given to the female and lack of consideration for her psyche. The images of a frightened child, the dreary room, the handkerchief, the executioner and her thoughts as she awaits the arrival of her *husband* realistically depict the female situation. The female is helpless in the face of her aggressors and has no rights. It symbolises how far patriarchy will go to ensure that the female lives as she is supposed to be. This narrative brings home the reality of the female situation in the Arab world depicted by the authors. They remain loyal to the Arab setting and realistically depict it and in so doing incite readers to action to save girls like Najwa from being married off too young. The narrative rises to a crescendo and we rise with it till the anti-climax where Najwa faints on seeing her executioner. The trauma of being forced to marry

a total stranger and the anxiety Najwa experiences in waiting to be deflowered present to readers the injustice of the whole situation and makes a strong impact on readers. The impact is further achieved because we listen with a nine year old child. And just like this child, we wish we could have saved her from this tragedy. It is rather inhumane how she is treated. The image of the executioner is actualised through the inhumanity of the groom deflowering her although she becomes unconscious. By this portrayal we see the narrator painting a picture of a society that is so callous in its desire to ensure that its culture is maintained. The farcical tenor of the depiction becomes obvious; the act borders on sleeping with a corpse. He executes his role with no emotional constraint and no feelings. It is not surprising then that Najwa resorts to alcohol and smoking to help her cope with her fate. Her plight comes to a head when the plan of avoiding pregnancy so her husband will be forced to divorce her fails: she gets pregnant on the very night of her defloration. The burden of marriage to a stranger at fourteen and motherhood at fifteen thrust on her lead her to find solace in alcohol as a mechanism to cope with her depression. Research has shown that the —...restricted and (for many) unsatisfying nature of women's traditional social roles provide a plausible reason why various kinds of depression might in fact have been very widespread among females.<sup>152</sup> Thus Najwa's depression and alcoholism are linked to rape and entrapment.

She is only a child when she becomes a mother herself so she is unable to hide her drinking habit from her son. She lies to him that the liquor she drinks is medicine. When she becomes *sick* in her husband's absence, in a state of drunken stupor, she recounts to her nine year old son the circumstances leading to her marriage. She does not realise how this will seriously affect the

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<sup>152</sup> Schur., p.203



psyche of the young boy. It is this burden of keeping his mother's drunken secrets that causes Suleiman to behave badly towards his friends. This is supported by research (Crawford, p.340) that shows that teenage parents lack the cognitive ability to be good parents.

The severity of how Najwa's marriage affects her psyche is depicted through the plot. Suleiman informs us that —Baba never found out about mama's illness; she only fell ill when he was away on business. It was as if, when the world was empty of him, she and I remained as stupid reminders, empty pages that had to be filled with the memory of how they had come to marry||

(p.2). The use of the child narrator is very effective; it hits readers and depicts the seriousness of Najwa's situation. Suleiman lives in emptiness and attests to his mother's emptiness as a result of how she is treated. The deep insights that he gives is brought to Najwa's narrative so that we get the full story of the situation of the female and its consequences on both the female and her children. The narrator's stance that she remains sober when the husband is present because she is fulfilled with him, is therefore not so. She does not drink when he is present because she knows he does not understand her situation since, as the *executioner*, he cannot comprehend her. She hides her drunkenness from him because as a Muslim she is not supposed to drink alcohol. Also his knowledge will have caused him to hate her and make him feel that he had failed in controlling her. Najwa, as a result, is trapped, discontented, and limited. She is not given the opportunity to assert her individuality or make any meaningful contribution to society. She is forced to stay home with nothing to occupy her but the upkeep of her son. Even her attempts at drawing are only distractions.

We established in Chapter Two that the female is trained to build her life around males. —Studies have regularly shown that in our society, marriage as a major life goal and psychological preoccupation has traditionally been a more crucial element in the socialisation and experience of females than males (Schur, p.60). Subsequently, Najwa is unable to live and plan without her husband, Faraj, and son. When Faraj is home, her duties of catering for his needs occupy her mind, leaving her with little time to be depressed. She usually cooks a feast when her husband returns home although he does not show any signs of appreciation.

She had spent the whole morning in the kitchen. She hollowed zucchini then stuffed them with rice and meat. The whole kitchen was alive with the smell of parsley, lemon and cardamom. She soaked pomegranate seeds in rose water and sugar. Then after she had showered, blow-dried her hair and put on a fresh dress, she burned musk incense sticks and dug them into the plant pot around the house in anticipation of his arrival. She looked beautiful; she always looked beautiful when he was home.

...he didn't sigh with contentment or say 'There is no place like home.' I wished he would because these words always made Mama's cheeks blush. (p.41-42)

Najwa makes herself beautiful for her husband's arrival because she is expected culturally to do so. We are allowed into the mind of Suleiman in order to get the perspective of a child so we are better informed of Najwa's situation. Her situation symbolises that of the female in the Arab world depicted. The burden of remaining as a wife to a man she does not love and his lack of appreciation make her captive in his house. To illustrate how her psyche is affected by the events of her life, the narrator depicts how she tries to kill herself and her son. —She had left the gas on in the kitchen. When she woke up the following morning she couldn't understand why I was so upset ...From the way she spoke through the door it felt as if it really was another woman who had left the gas on to kill us (p.123). Her inability to remember that she had left the gas on to kill them shows her mental state which is compounded by her husband's political activism. Due to his political affiliations,

she is cut off from family and friends who could, perhaps, have rid her of boredom and filled the intervals between her husband's absence.

She often, during those empty days Baba was away, walked aimlessly around the house. And she never sang to herself in that soft, absentminded way she often did when taking a bath or painting her eyes in front of the mirror or drawing in the garden. That singing that always evoked a girl unaware of herself, walking home from school, brushing her fingers against the wall: a moment before the Italian Coffee House, a moment sheltered in the clarity of innocence, before the quick force that, without argument, without the chance to say, 'No,' thrust her over the border and into womanhood, then irrevocably into motherhood. I wanted so much to make her happy, as happy as she seemed when Baba was home. Except it wasn't happiness that came over her then but something like confidence: she moved faster and sounded more self-assured. (p.122-3)

Najwa's days are described as empty by the narrator. —Empty adequately describes her life as she lives without purpose and walks around aimlessly without any vocation or pursuit to occupy her. Juxtaposition is used here to bring out the consequences of forced and child marriages and to also give a deeper insight into the female situation. Najwa's respite is when she can be herself.

This according to the narrator is when —I...she... sang to herself in that soft, absentminded way she often did when taking a bath or painting her eyes in front of the mirror or drawing in the garden. That singing that always evoked a girl unaware of herself, walking home from.... Her happiness is depicted in the light of her life before she is forced into marriage and thrust into motherhood when just a child herself. The narrative informs readers of her plight after marriage.

The narrator's deliberate use of juxtaposition and contrast brings out the hopelessness of the female situation. He uses the word —seemed to describe his mother's happiness which indicates that he knows that she is unhappy. —I wanted so much to make her happy, as happy as she seemed.... Except it wasn't happiness that came over her then.... This observation by a nine year old shocks and realistically presents the situation of the female in the Arab world created by



Matar. Although Suleiman wants to make his mother happy he recognises that this is impossible. Her happiness ended when her childhood was stolen from her. This extract sums up the plight of the female when she is forced into marriage; she is rendered sad and aimless. Najwa becomes an alcoholic and chain smoker to endure the life thrust on her by her father. The dire consequences of the experiences of the female are illustrated by the narrator as she breaks down; A low, strangled sound came muffled through her hands. Her crying was not normal. Mama's ill again, I thought. I looked at Moosa. She began speaking, but I could hardly make out the words, things about her bad luck and how since childhood she had been cursed with bad luck, bad luck bad luck bad luck, calling for her dead Baba to come back and help her, pleading with him to return and save her because it was too soon, she said, all too much and too soon. She wept. (p.80)

The narrator recognises that Najwa is not really ill. He knows that her presumed illness is a psychological issue. His words appear to be normal but have connotations that imply otherwise. This extract is significant as it brings out how the female has been socialised to unconsciously blame herself for her woes and that of her family. Just as Najwa turns to her dead father who is the cause of her plight for help, the female turns to her aggressors for help which she knows will not be granted her. This depicts the female's lack of an alternative *saviour*. Also, due to her assumed impurity the female in the Arab world created by Matar attributes bad experiences to her bad luck and, in some instances, is made to believe that she has been cursed. It is because of this phenomenon that some families in India employ the services of an astrologer to enquire about the fate of an intended bride. If the astrologer declares that she has bad fortune, the proposed marriage is cancelled. The Arab female has no such —luxury—. Although our focus here is not the attitude of the narrator, it is important to state that of the narrator of In the Country of Men. He consistently gives the impression that Najwa's drunkenness and suicidal tendencies cease to be with the presence of Faraj, her husband. He informs us of how Najwa returns to alcohol when Faraj is arrested again, and her soberness upon his release. However, as we earlier stated, his presence only provides her with other tasks to occupy herself and, according to the narrator, —I wanted to make her happy, as happy as she seemed when Baba was home. Except it wasn't happiness that came

over her then but something like confidence (p.123). Hence she is not fulfilled with him but only distracted by his presence.

Firdaus (Woman at Point Zero), on the other hand, becomes a prostitute because of abuse and betrayal. Although the prostitute appears to have some freedom, she is harassed by pimps or a Madame or the government, who takes a chunk of her earnings. Throughout history governments have regulated and been involved in prostitution<sup>153</sup> just like pimps. Objectification of the female reaches its peak in prostitution, as affirmed by Schur: —The buying and selling of female sexuality epitomizes, in a sense, woman's devaluation and objectification (p.164). It is this realisation that even the prostitute is not independent that results in Firdaus' decision to commit murder. By returning the slap of the pimp before killing him, and harassing a prince, she breaks all the limits put on the behaviour of the female. The narrator depicts, through Firdaus, the effects of female genital mutilation. Throughout the story she links her inability to feel pleasure during sex to this practice. Clitoridectomy results in frigidity for the female and ensures passivity and acceptance of the sexual activity of the male. It is only the male that has pleasure in sex since female sexual pleasure is frowned on by Arab culture. The psychological effects of clitoridectomy are highlighted in both Woman at Point Zero and God Dies by the Nile. It is a memory that hunts Bahiah in Two Women in One and Zakeya in God Dies by the Nile. Contrary to Freud's assertion that the inability of some women to relinquish the excitability of the clitoris results in their frigidity, it is the removal of this organ which represents total relinquishing of its excitability and leads to frigidity.

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<sup>153</sup> Gilfoyle, Timothy J. —Prostitutes in History: From Parables of Pornography to Metaphors of Modernity! The American Historical Review. Oxford University Press, (1999, Feb) Vol. 104, No. 1, pp. 117-141

In the foregoing discussion, we have tried to examine and highlight the odds against the virgin and the whore in the Arab societies portrayed by both el Saadawi and Matar. We have noted the psychological and physical implications of the women's experiences. Socialization has been proved to be the root cause of the woes of women all over the world. Since socialisation in the Arab world is prescribed by patriarchy and is manipulated by religion to create static roles for the sexes, it is apparent that the two writers are calling attention to what they find unacceptable in their societies. The implication of this, in the light of the novels and, to some extent, the polemic works, is a call for change. To el Saadawi and Matar, religion in itself is not bad but it is its interpretation through patriarchal notions that needs to be revised. If both sexes are created by God, then He certainly does not prefer one sex to the other. Arab female scholars like Fatima Merssini, Farida Shaheed and Nawal el Saadawi have done a lot of research in this area, revealing how imperative it is for the socialisation process to be revised and desegregated.

In the light of this, we will now turn our attention to some polemic texts and discuss their views on the female condition and socialisation. According to Mernissi (1991), during the pre-Islamic and early Islamic eras, women held positions of power and had Friday Muslim prayers said for them. Her research shows that segregation was not initially a religious practice until later.

Prophet Mohammed's wives, for example, mixed freely with other believers and strongly influenced his decisions. She also posits that veiling was introduced to distinguish between two men, the prophet Mohammed and Anas Ibn Malik<sup>154</sup> and thus has no religious basis. Although segregation and veiling might not have any religious beginnings, they have been fostered into

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<sup>154</sup> Mernissi, Fatima. Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry. Trans. Mary Jo Lokeland. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991.



Islam, and have been forced on women. The question which then arises is, why must the female conform to these prescriptions? She has to conform because the body of the female represents the Arab world and its culture. Failure to conform to veiling, dress code and segregation not only makes a female non-Arab but also a traitor of her people. Hence females who live both within and outside the Arab peninsula must oblige.<sup>155</sup> —From the perspective of local Muslim authorities, women are cultural symbols who are to remain with, and preferably behind, their men. What matters, as always, is that women should be silent.<sup>121</sup> Only the separation of the female body from the nation, and recognition of her rights as an individual can adequately solve the female dilemma. This is because,

...privatization of women, as Muslim and Arab feminists have argued (especially Leila Ahmed in *Women and Gender in Islam*), is a stigma which has resulted from the perceived threat of women to patriarchal political and economic power, one which finds its roots in religious and political history and ideologies.<sup>156</sup>

The female must not be seen as a foe but a friend. The antagonism between the sexes must be eliminated to enable both fulfil their religious, social and biological duties. This would greatly aid desegregation in the Arab world and perhaps stop the attack on females who intrude into the *umma*. It will also help reduce double standards in the society. In the Arab society, the ideal man is one who provides for his female relatives and ensures that they conform to the virgin image. However, due to economic reasons and high unemployment rates, he is unable to do this. The reality created by daily living is different from the ideals created by culture and religion; thus the double standards. This can adversely affect the psyche of the male and result in violence against women who earn their own living. There is increase in violence against women in the Arab world and

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<sup>155</sup> Cooke, Miriam. —Women, Religion, and the Postcolonial Arab World. In *Cultural Critique*. No. 45 (Spring, 2000), pp. 150-184 URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1354370> .Accessed: 14/05/2013 <sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.153

<sup>156</sup> Abdo, Diya M. —Redefining the Warring Self in Hanan Al-Shaykh's the "Story of Zahra" and Frank McGuinness' "Carthaginians" In *Pacific Coast Philology*. Vol. 42, No. 2, Transoceanic Dialogues (2007), pp. 217-237

other parts of the world due to this. Islamic fundamentalists are at the fore of this; their aim is to ensure that the female conforms to the traditional and religious image of the virgin. Hundreds of women suffer acid attacks<sup>157</sup> and are sold into sex slavery annually as a result of this practice.

The objectification of the female has been made possible due to the traditional roles prescribed for her and the interpretation of patriarchy of these roles. Females are usually associated with nature: the body, earth and the domestic; and they are also regarded as passive, emotional, weak, and as followers.<sup>24</sup> These associations of womanhood, according to Gerda Lerner, have not been proved and therefore are merely presumptions. Lerner, a feminist historian and writer, puts the major presumptions about gender in patriarchal societies as follows:

Men are naturally superior, stronger and more rational, therefore designed to be dominant. From this follows that men are political citizens and responsible for and representing the polity. Women are 'naturally' weaker, inferior in intellect and rational capacities, unstable emotionally and therefore incapable of political participation. They stand outside the polity. Men, by their rational minds, explain and order the world. Women by their nurturant function sustain daily life and the continuity of the species. While both functions are essential, that of men is superior to that of women.<sup>158</sup>

The traditional roles of the female are not bad in themselves but their use to subjugate and limit them is. It is the restriction of the female solely to these roles and her assumed inferiority that must be criticized. Carol McMillan argues that,

The thrust of feminist argument has... for the most part, rested on the belief that since (apart from reproduction) there are no important differences between the sexes, nothing can justify a segregation of roles. Any differences which may exist are said to be fostered culturally by forcing women to concentrate their activities exclusively in the domestic sphere. This in turn leads to the development of supposedly feminine traits such as self-sacrifice and passivity, which has the added consequence of inhibiting

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<sup>157</sup> —Women Disfigured by Acid Attacks. 11/09/ 13  
<http://edition.cnn.com/video/data/2.0/video/international/2013/08/11/acid-attacks-the-facts.cnn.html> <sup>24</sup> Shaw, M. Susan. Lee, Janet. Women's Voices, Feminist Visions. Mayfield: California, 1960. p.60 and p.187

<sup>158</sup> Lerner, Gerda. —The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy. Women and History. New York: Oxford UP, 1993. Vol. 2 p.3-12

the development in women of their potential as rational, intellectual and creative beings.<sup>159</sup>

Therefore just as man is not limited to his traditional roles as son, brother, husband and father, so must the woman not be.

The restriction of some men to these traditional roles in the matrilineal eastern state of Meghalaya, India, shows the same outcome as the female situation.<sup>160</sup> The men in this society say —We have been reduced to baby-sitters or housekeepers. We have no role in our society except fathering babies.<sup>161</sup> Their sense of inferiority and discontentment prove that traditional roles are not enough to satisfy both sexes. The female's intellect must be developed just like the male. Both sexes must be given the opportunity to be individuals who make their own choices. No scientific research has been able to prove that there is any cognitive difference between the sexes. In fact Crawford (2006) notes that —...despite a hundred years of research on gender related differences, no one has ever discovered a psychological trait or cognitive ability on which men and women are completely different (p.101). An understanding of this fact will greatly help remove the stigmatisation attached to femininity. This will also enable men to mix freely with women without fear of being emasculated. Farah (1974) observes that —Surely a woman is indispensable to man... A man needs a woman; a woman needs a man. Both sexes are indispensable to each other and together they can make a better world. However, this is only possible if both males and females take active part in the socialisation process. —The family is considered the foundation of the Arab

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<sup>159</sup> McMillan, Carol. Women, Reason and Nature: Some Philosophical Problems with Feminism. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982. p.ix

<sup>160</sup> Allen, Timothy. —Meghalaya, India: Where women rule, and men are suffragettes. 19/01/12. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-16592633> 20/02/12

Bhaumik, Subir. —Women's domination under threat 24/06/2003 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/3015838.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3015838.stm) 20/02/12

<sup>161</sup> Subir



community, and there is a strong emphasis on traditional gender roles... Arab women have primary responsibility for childbearing, childrearing, and socializing future generations with Arab values.<sup>162</sup> As indicated by the extract, socialisation has hitherto greatly been considered a female affair; thus there ought to be a shift. It is essential that the father not only play the role of provider but take active part in the upbringing of his child.

Studies conclude that

Developing a separate sense of a self is an essential task for every human infant... Because most childcare is done by women... Girls grow up with a sense of similarity to and continuity with their mother and a sense of connection to others in general. Boys, however, must learn the more difficult lesson that their gender identity is not-female, or mother... boys develop an identity based on defining themselves in opposition to all that is feminine: Femininity becomes negative and masculinity positive.

These gender differences in identity have important consequences. Boys who define masculinity as the opposite of femininity grow into men who devalue women and believe in the superiority of whatever qualities they define as masculine. They deny and repress their needs for closeness and connection to others, which reduce their ability to be emotionally connected and expressive and leads them to be satisfied with less intimacy.<sup>163</sup>

Thus the cycle of female inferiority and otherness can be broken by fathers taking an active part in the rearing of their children. This might not be an end in itself if the man does not regard the individuality and the rights of the woman. What we are advocating for is not androgyny as was proposed by some feminist in the 1960's and 70's. We call for the acceptance and acknowledgement of the differences (physiological and biological) between the sexes and respect for both. It is doing away with the negativity that has been associated with femininity, the appreciation of the individuality, and the recognition of the rights of both sexes in order to eliminate all forms of abuse and discrimination that we advocate. A conscious effort to change

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<sup>162</sup> Ghazal, Jen'nan. —The Sources of Gender Role Attitudes among Christian and Muslim Arab-American Women. *Sociology of Religion*. Vol. 64, No. 2. (Summer, 2003) pp. 207-222

<sup>163</sup> Crawford, p.124

patriarchal notions and cultural practices which negatively affect women would greatly improve the lot of the female. As transsexuals have proved, both sexes carry each other in their body makeup; the introduction of the appropriate kinds of hormones into a male body can change it into female and vice-versa. We must acknowledge our equality and differences. Both male and female are equal but different. The female therefore must be seen and defined as a female and judged based on herself and not based on what is male. Femininity must not be seen as the opposite of and inferior to masculinity. If femininity is defined based on masculinity the female will inevitably come out as lacking just as the male will be if he is defined based on the female.

She is an individual and must be seen as such and her rights acknowledged.



## Conclusion

This thesis set out to analyse the categorisation of the female under the classes of virgin and whore as depicted by both Matar and el Saadawi. We see how religion and culture aid patriarchy in prescribing roles for the female, and ensure her subordination. The female is predominantly restricted to the roles of daughter, sister, wife and mother in the society under study. Both writers depict the subordinate position of the female in the Maghreb Arab world they reflect in their novels. There is a lot of literature on the virgin-whore dichotomy and in comparing such polemic works to the novels under study, we find that the novelists are faithful to the Arab settings they use. They do not run from the realities of the female situation for the purposes of indicting it. Their verisimilitude is admirable for their depiction is bare and pointing. They jolt readers out of apathy and push them to react to save the female; they call readers to indict the cultural and religious norms and values that reduce the female to an object which results in her suffering of physical, psychological and sexual abuse.

El Saadawi, in portraying the female, depicts the woes against her and how she is abused and victimised by the male. In Woman at Point Zero, God Dies by the Nile and Two Women in One, she sympathises with her characters and their choices. She does not blame Firdaus for choosing to be a prostitute but rather blames this choice on the men who raped and victimised her. Neither does she blame her for killing her pimp nor Zakeya for murdering the mayor. She represents females who fit into both classes of the virgin and whore. The female who wants to be accepted in society must go through cultural practices such as female genital mutilation to ensure her chastity before and fidelity after marriage. Ironically, all she is forbidden is allowed the male who rules both the domestic and public spheres. This creates double standards in the society and facilitates the



categorisation of the female. Also male domination of both the domestic and public spheres leaves no room for the female to exercise her rights and intellects as an individual. This is supported by both culture and religion. Since the male is the custodian of religion and all scriptures are given through him, he ensures that scriptures that debase and support the inferiority of the female overshadow those that prove her equal with him and give her rights to own property, to administer her estate, to education and active participation in the polity. This is done in order to silence her and keep her ignorant of her rights. Culture becomes wrongly disguised as religion, thus legitimising the inferiority of the female. The status quo then is made to look divinely ordained and unquestionable.

According to Mernissi and el Saadawi, the male fear of the innate power of the female results in prescriptions such as veiling, clitoridectomy, child and forced marriages and segregation to prevent her from discovering and utilising her power. The fear of men being emasculated is what has caused the imposition of such rules on the female. The sexual and physical abuse suffered by the female is an expression of male power largely caused by the objectification of the female. According to feminist ideology, patriarchy is to be blamed for the woes of the female. The grounding of patriarchal ideologies has greatly affected the rights of the female and the freedom granted her before the establishment of patriarchy, hence rendering her mindless and voiceless. The female being deprived of her intellects is brainwashed to believe in her inferiority and impurity through socialisation. She is as a result trapped into participating in rituals that subjugate her kind.

Even modernisation and education has not changed the female situation much. This is because the issue of straightjacketing still persists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In el Saadawi and Matar's novels the female characters portray the virgin and the whore dichotomy to depict the odds against the female

and her efforts to rise above them and move from the shadows into the spotlight. The image of the virgin archetype conforms to the dictates of patriarchy and gives full performance of her virginity socially, culturally and biologically. This female is portrayed as discontented and suffers from neurosis because of her experiences of sexual and physical abuse. Sexual abuse leads some like Najwa to become alcoholics and chain smokers and others like Firdaus to become prostitutes. Matar depicts through Najwa that the virgin-whore dichotomy is only a farce. Hence Najwa is portrayed as both virgin and whore. However, just like the conscious efforts of society to hide the existence of the *good girl* and *bad girl* traits in one female, Najwa's alcoholism, chain smoking and suicidal characteristics are kept hidden from the society. Her virginal characteristics are highlighted for all to see. Although she fits into the class of the whore, her virginal roles overshadow it.

By contrast, some females in the class of the whore like Firdaus learn to play the game of men and elevate their social status by prostituting their bodies. Bahiah, similarly, beats her husband and escapes matrimony to live independently. She paints, and helps run a secret printing press which publishes political leaflets against the government. Fatheya also insults her husband, the village imam, and goes against his will and that of the whole town by adopting a bastard. As the aim of patriarchy is to rule and control women, these females are dealt with severely to ensure that others do not follow their example. Bahiah is imprisoned and so is Zakeya for murdering the mayor who represents patriarchy in God Dies by the Nile. Fatheya on the other hand is brutally murdered by the citizens of Kalr El Teen for daring to have a voice and a choice. Firdaus is however imprisoned and later hanged for killing a man who exploits and abuses her, and perhaps for assaulting a prince who is one of her clients. Their end illustrates the double bind which befalls women. If the female conforms, she is abused and rendered an object but if she rebels, she is killed or labelled a whore.

In both instances she is treated not as an individual with a voice and choice but as a body without a voice who must always do what she is told. She is damned whether she is a good girl or a bad one. Straightjacketing greatly limits the horizon of the female and leads to her discontentment as she is limited only to her traditionally prescribed roles. Even education does not offer her much as in the end it is the men who decide her fate.

As has been illustrated by the novels under discussion, the liberation of the female does not lie solely in her education and empowerment. Current trends in the Arab world and Asia show the increase of persecution and violence against women by the enforcement of *sharia* in some states. This surge in violence indicates that more ought to be done and laws enacted to protect the female. Cultural practices and laws that are against women should be abolished. There is also the necessity for the revision of the socialisation process in order to eliminate the different ways through which the sexes are socialised, and the recognition of the female as an individual with rights and a voice.

In our research concerning the Arab world we admire the verisimilitude used by el Saadawi and Matar to capture the Arab situation to give us a fresh perspective on the problems that females are encountering all over the world. They take the cover off culture and religion so we can see injustice and abuse for what they are and clearly represent the consequences of categorisation of the female in all societies. They call us to redefine and change our traditional ideologies of who the female is and point out her individuality and uniqueness. Their stance calls on us to institute mechanisms in society to allow females to be themselves without resulting to rebellion.



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