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The Lonely Heroines Pressed into Margins: El Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* and Rum's *A Woman is No Man*¹

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Abstract

The present study is a comparative feminist reading of the surreal and satirical novel *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* (1993) by the Arab novelist Nawal El Saadawi compared with the fictional diasporic novel, *A Woman is No Man* (2019) written by the Arab American novelist Etaf Rum. Considering El Saadawi's feminist term, Female genital mutilation, the current study aims to elucidate the ways through which society restricts women. Through their novels, El Saadawi and Rum present the protagonists as physically and psychologically oppressed under their patriarchal surrounding system. The authors' lives are similar to that of their heroines in many ways due to them both facing similar Arab patriarchal oppression. These patriarchal traditions veil women's minds, consider them inferiors, and deprive them of their basic rights based on the untrue claim that God has given these rights only to men. After the investigation of El Saadawi's narration, it is concluded that despite the negligence of Arab woman's rights by the patriarchal society these women can be and become stronger than any man can. These women are responsible for their houses and their children and can one day lead the world if they are given the chance to attain higher education and proper job.

Keywords: Arab Traditions, El Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, Female Genital

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Mutilation, Oppression, Rum's *A Woman is No Man*, Patriarchal System

1. Introduction

The main goal of the present article is to compare the surreal and satirical novel, *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, with the fictional diasporic novel *A Woman is No Man*, the first work is written by Nawal El Saadawi, the feminist Arab writer who is regarded as the most active supporter of women's rights in Arab society. In the Arab world, particularly in Egypt, she is revered as the patron saint of modern feminism (Misdary, 2021, para. 17). Her novel is about a concealed woman who disappears without a trace. Police and investigators look into the matter and wonder if she is associated with a questionable or rebellious case. They find it hard to believe that a woman could just get up and leave her spouse and family. The protagonist is an unnamed woman who was raised by her aunt without a mother. When she was younger, she aspired to be a prophetess like the Lady of Purity and yearned to see and interact with her mother, who is buried deep inside the earth. She seeks to understand the Lady of Purity better, but her main focus is on discovering who she is (Tiwari, 2017, para. 6).

The other work is written by the Arab American writer, Etaf Rum, who wrote her novel, *A Woman is No Man* in 2019, which was one of her most anticipated books. It dealt with themes including familial loyalty, gender expectations, domestic abuse, assimilation, honor, dishonor, and cultural continuity (Bader, 2019, para. 2). It expresses a perspective on the American immigrant experience that is different from what the media portrays where women are not allowed to leave their homes by themselves or to participate in American culture. Arranged marriages and having sons to pass on the name of the husband's family have been the most significant issues in the lives of these women in America. Arab customs and humiliation rule their community, where women are oppressed and trapped.

Few critics and researchers have focused on the suffering of the Arab woman under the control of man in El Saadawi's and Rum's writings but no academic work compares these two novels together; hence, the present article tries to fill this gap. The study will focus on the sufferings of Arab women in the village of oil concentrating on the nameless heroine who attempts to run away and leave the dominance of her patriarchal system and Isra, Deya, Sarah, and Fareeda in America. They strive to find themselves and present their identity as respectable women since the nameless woman is an archeologist and can have a good job while the Arab American women are good readers and trying to find their way to get higher education. This study will benefit from the feminist term, female genital mutilation proposed by El Saadawi to investigate how

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these women are physically and psychologically presented as oppressed under their patriarchal surrounding system that puts women under the domination of men. This domination happens through men constantly giving women orders to serve them and fulfill their desires; furthermore, these men beat the women if they disobey them or try to patriarchal dominance.

This patriarchal system considers women as inferiors and deprives them of their basic rights with the claim that God has given these rights only to men. Men feel proud when they beat their wives, they insist that God has offered men the opportunity to marry four women instead of one; God has given men all the rights of life and prevented women from having any rights. Women were considered as animals following their owners and serving them silently; therefore, these oppressed women tried to resist their oppressors who veiled them from seeing their ways and revoluted to gain their independence and free themselves from the patriarchal dominance.

2. Feminist Characters Rising Against Patriarchal Control

Any attempt to subvert patriarchy in its various expressions is referred to as feminism. Women's interests are viewed as being subordinate to men's interests in patriarchal power structures. These power relationships can take on a variety of shapes, such as partitioning the types of tasks that people can handle according to their sex or internalizing specific norms like the typical representation of femininity that institutions promote. The societal interpretation of biological sexual distinctions is the foundation of patriarchal power. Women did not have any formal rights in municipal or national governance between 1550 and 1700, including the right to vote. Even while conditions for women's education had improved between 1550 and 1700, they were still prevented from attending universities and the associated benefits.

It is undoubtedly untrue, according to Hodgson-Wright (1998), that all men have more power than all women do (p. 4). For instance, an educated aristocratic woman like the unnamed character in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* comes from a good cultural background and is quite powerful. She is a woman of honor. Her work and research are the only things that keep her busy (El Saadawi, 1993, p. 1). Because they want to be able to easily control their women the males in the community are scared of her.

Some of the female protagonists, like Sarah in Rum's *A Woman is No Man*, are also very strong. Sarah rejects her mother's picks for suitors and flees the patriarchal rule of society. She says, "I don't have a choice, Isra," which gives the impression that

she is rather defiant. "I have to go; I can't continue to live this way"(Rum, 2019, p. 230). Similar to Deya, her sisters are educated and desire to attend college despite obstacles. They strive to be strong, self-sufficient women, and as a result, the patriarchal Arab society that surrounds them in America starts to fear them. Compared to a male apprentice, these aristocratic women benefit from socioeconomic power more.

Married women had no legal independence from their husbands, and there were no laws supporting them in their fight for pay parity and other rights (Hodgson-wright, 1998, p. 4); for instance, the nameless woman in El Saadawi's story married and gave up her freedom to live under her husband's dominance. The husband could stand against her will and way, limit her independence, and tie her fate to that of his, as stated by El Saadawi in "If you hadn't been standing like this, I wouldn't have fallen over [...] You standing in my way like this" (El Saadawi, 2001, p. 25).

In Rum's *A Woman is No Man*, Isra marries Adam with the hope that union with an American man will improve her life and set her free from her father's patriarchal rule. She is appalled by Adam's patriarchal beliefs and demands, which limit her to living in his house, cooking his food, and having his children. "That's the life of a woman, you know. Running around taking orders" (Rum, 2019, p. 58). He brutally abuses her and frequently beats her. In the same way that it exists in Arab countries, patriarchy also exists in Arab-American society.

El Saadawi says that feminist liberation groups in the West are starting to comprehend the particulars of women's circumstances in developing nations. While these movements share some universal traits, some key distinctions can be drawn based on the viciousness of the movements in various contexts at various phases of economic, social, and political development. Liberation from foreign dominance frequently continues to be a major issue in developing nations, which can have an impact on the nature and scope of battles about other issues, such as women's status in society (Newson-Horst, 2010, p. 55). In the case of *Love in The Kingdom of Oil*, the whole village is under the domination of His Majesty and the head of the oil company. They control everything in the village especially the women who are veiled and forced to carry the jars of oil. Female workers' physic must be hidden followed by the laws and orders of His Majesty. Everybody in the village knows "that the only person who benefits from the oil is the owner of the company, and His Majesty of course. [...] It's their right, by order of heaven" (El Saadawi, 2001, p. 68).

Arab traditions, which prevent Arab American women from finishing their

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education and from leaving the house without a companion (their *Mahram*⁵), govern their lives. Patriarchal traditions restrict women from selecting the guy they would love; instead, their families force them into arranged marriages. As an illustration, Isra's family sought to make her marry a man who did not know or love her to erase the stigma of having an unmarried daughter. "But what if the suitor and I don't love each other? [...] What does love have to do with marriage?" (Rum, 2019, p. 6). Isra's husband abducted her and forced her to live in misery with him in America, where she did not even speak the language.

According to El Saadawi, women's social and cultural conditions will only improve with the aid of essential governmental initiatives and successful organizations, and hopefully one day the ultimate emancipation of women and genuine equality between the sexes will be realized. The advancement of this movement also requires that men comprehend and even feel driven to make changes within themselves; regrettably, men appear to be so hesitant to do so (Newson-Horst, 2010, pp. 54-55).

The nameless heroin states that the women in the oil village are proud of their marriages and the number of children they have since it indicates the status of women. The anonymous protagonist of El Saadawi vows never to rely on a man including her boss or husband. She would rather spend her life acquiring prestige and seeking self-discovery by looking for a goddess than doing anything else. She never had children because she believed that patriarchal culture takes advantage of motherhood to restrict women's freedom. When she states, "They no longer had hope in life, for what had it achieved for them?" she makes an effort to begin breaking free from the Arab society around her. She had not found anything, but at least she was not ashamed of uncovering her face" (El Saadawi, 2001, p. 87).

Isra and Fareeda's duty in the home in *A Woman is No Man* is to bear their children, submit to their husbands' commands, and maintain composure while they are being physically and verbally abused. Even though they live in America, they adhere to Arab traditions because, according to Fareeda, they are concerned about damaging their reputation; "It doesn't matter where we live. Preserving our culture is what's most important. All you need to worry about is finding a good man to provide for you" (Rum, 2019, p. 17).

El Saadawi added that the present conflicts attempt to guarantee that Arab people regain sovereignty over their cultural legacy; they will be able to accomplish this

⁵ المحرم

aim, to liberate themselves from the rule and influences of foreign capitalism, by trying to fully develop what they already have. They need to aspire to establish a free society with equal rights for all people and eliminate the system's injustices and oppression, which are supported by patriarchal class distinctions and advantages (Newson-Horst, 2010, p. 56).

In El Saadawi's novel, Arab women try to be strong in their fight against oppression and find the means to escape the patriarchal ruling system: "We shall not be worthy of a right that we take from hands other than our own" (El Saadawi, 2001, p. 99). These women believe that they should not willingly place themselves in this predicament and should not "consent to be placed in conditions that an animal would not tolerate" (El Saadawi, 2001, p. 99).

The circumstance that Isra is in is comparable. She continually wants Adam and his mother's favor since she is so terrified of them. Despite Adam's frequent beatings, Isra restricts her happiness to them; he does so solely to vent his rage on her when his mother nags him about having a boy to carry his name or requests that he performs extra work on behalf of his siblings. Isra's patriarchal family views her as someone who is oblivious to her suffering and sorrow. In an effort to have another boy kid, she is compelled to quit nursing her daughters. "Breastfeeding prevented pregnancy, and Adam needed a son. Isra obeyed her without resistance" (Rum, 2019, p. 88). She was also told to stop reading her favorite novels by her family, but she persisted, hiding the books in the bowl in her room out of constant fear that Adam would find them one day.

El Saadawi (2001) explains that the fight for reaching equality for women in poor nations is not a constrained obsessive movement that is biased in prioritizing the female sex over men; this movement does not rise to defend women's rights at all costs. Women's status and circumstances cannot change or progress unless the entire society works toward these goals. All forms of fanaticism - be it religious, political, or social - are rejected. The lengthy and arduous fight for women's emancipation demands women develop a flexible mindset and be open and ready to join forces with everyone who supports progress. Women should be prepared to work with democratic and nationalist forces, progressive religious groups, as well as organizations with a socialist and Marxist orientation, and make a union (Newson-Horst, 2010, p. 57).

In El Saadawi's novel, the oppressed women in the oil hamlet banded together to end their enslavement. They ran away from their masters to become the masters themselves and demanded their wages using their own hands. They all shouted simultaneously. The women raised their arms in a single forceful motion and the word

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took on the appearance of a ball of light that jumped from mouth to mouth (El Saadawi, 2001, p. 100). However, their union was insufficient for they did not encounter anyone outside of their hamlet and their veils prevented them from being recognized. Despite these limitations, they still had the power to bring about change in their environment and their words shone like lights in the night as they bravely dealt with their problems.

Isra, in the climax of the novel, did not agree to unite with Sarah and refused to run away thinking of saving her daughter's life and reputation. She could not stand against her situation all alone for the revolution needs more than one power to be strong enough to face the patriarchy's oppression. However, her daughter, Deya, met her aunt, Sarah, and with her help, she could gain her rights and stand strong against her grandparent's oppression. "She had to stand up for herself. She had to fight. She had to. The fight was worth everything if it meant finally having a voice" (Rum, 2019, p. 247).

3. Heroines through the Lens of Female Genital Mutilation

According to Faist (2021), Female circumcision was a delicate and divisive subject that El-Saadawi initially addressed as an Arab writer and it has since been one of the key themes in her scientific and creative works. She documented her patients' hardships and the harm caused by genital mutilation for them in her professional writings as a doctor. She examined the cultural and historical origins of this horrible act in her creative works such as in the play *Isis* (1986) (Zemo, 2019, p. 80). She underwent this procedure and was coerced into having her body disfigured as a child. When she graduated from medical school, many women sought her help to escape it.

The patriarchal society considers female organs disgraceful and tries to remove and replace them with male organs since to them it is a dignity and honor to be a man. In *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, they remove the breasts of the goddess to turn her into a god. In addition, they want to omit her smile or any sign of happiness to make her sad (El Saadawi, 2001, p. 71).

El Saadawi (1997) asserts that the removal of a woman's intellect - the claim that she lacks reason or intelligence - and the removal of specific body parts - such as female genital mutilation - are instances of the violation of women's most basic rights (P. 332). In *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, women are used like animals for carrying things. They are treated harshly as if they do not feel pain. Sometimes they are even considered less intelligent than the animals: "The donkey seemed to her to be more intelligent than women" (El Saadawi, 2001, p. 30). In the case of Rum's novel, women

are abandoned to the amount that they believe "woman was put on this earth to please her husband. Even if he was wrong" (Rum, 2019, p. 223).

That patriarchal society attributes its faults to Islam and God: "Instead of one wife, God will give me four" (El Saadawi, 2001, p. 94). El Saadawi (1977) states that women, particularly Arab women, must understand that the question of women's emancipation is primarily a political and economic issue and is not related to Islam or Eastern tradition. It opposes colonial regimes both inside and outside of the Arab community as well as all forms of exploitation and limitations including those that are economic, sexual, social, cultural, and moral (p. 332).

The patriarchal society in America tries to follow the Arab traditions even if it is not related to Islam. Islam orders women to wear *Al hijab*; however, Fareeda and Adam order Isra and her daughters to leave *Al Hijab*⁶ to avoid the speech of the people around them: "she finally understood why Fareeda had banned them from wearing *al hijab* outside of school" (Rum, 2019, p. 84).

Newson-Horst (2010) asserts that lying is a form of psychological abuse. Even more serious than the mutilation of the female or male genitalia is the crime of mind mutilation. Some antiquated beliefs consider women's strives for attaining their rights as a direct violation of God's laws, moral standards, and sacred teachings (Newson-Horst, 2010, p. 120). In *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, the patriarchal society mutilates women's minds claiming that there are no independent rights for women by the orders of God or His Majesty: "Your wage is due from God [...] You deserve nothing apart from fire and burning" (El Saadawi, 2001, p. 60). The patriarchal system tries to blame all their laws and oppression on God.

Women who defy their husbands will suffer severe punishment. Religious obedience is inseparable from paternal and marital obedience. Women who betray their husbands risk the death penalty but males are free to do so under the justification that God has granted them the right to polygamy and divorce (Newson-Horst, 2010, p. 142). "If a woman leaves her husband's bed for one night, she shall be hung by her hair on the Day of Resurrection and burnt in the fire" (El Saadawi, 2001, p. 73).

According to Rum (2019), a man has the right to kill a woman if she rebels against the patriarchal domination of her spouse, just like the neighbor's daughter whose husband killed her after she requested for a divorce. "He says he doesn't know what happened. They found him standing over her body with a knife" (Rum, 2019, p.

⁶ الحجاب

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222). In *A Woman is No Man*, the patriarchal society mutilates women's minds: "we have a reputation here. What will Arabs say if they see my young wife wandering the streets alone?" (Rum, 2019, p. 101).

However, Rum promotes Islam as a path to world peace and unadulterated salvation in the book's conclusion, elevating women to a lofty status deserving of adoration and respect. Brother Hakeem explained to the pupils in Deya's lesson that because women are so significant and bear the weight of the entire universe, Islam accords them a hallowed status that places heaven at their feet: "when we accept that heaven lies underneath the feet of a woman, we are more respectful of women everywhere" (Rum, 2019, p. 234).

In El Saadawi's novel, men use women to fulfill their sexual desires and carry the burden of doing their hard work: "He never stopped making demands. Like a child, he could neither feed himself nor get himself something to drink" (El Saadawi, 2001, p. 19). In Rum's novel, the same theme is perceived when Deya tells her suitor Nasser "Everyone knows it's a woman's job to raise children" (Rum, 2019, p. 179).

According to what El Saadawi learned from her work as a doctor and a psychiatrist female genital mutilation has nothing to do with women's morals and does not make them more likely to be monogamous or dedicated to their husbands in the future. Contrarily, female genital mutilation increases the likelihood of women developing stronger sexual propensities. This is because circumcised women find it more difficult to obtain sexual fulfillment with their husbands and will instead look for it elsewhere outside of marriage (Newson-Horst, 2010, p. 142). In the case of El Saadawi's heroin, she ran away to another man's house to fulfill her sexual desires with him (El Saadawi, 2001, p. 55).

4. Concluding Remarks

The current article provided an analysis of the issue of women's oppression under patriarchal Arab traditions addressed in El Saadawi's novel *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* and Rum's *A Woman is No Man*. It tried to use the feminist notion of female genital mutilation projected in her book by El Saadawi to examine how the female protagonists of the novels were the victims of their patriarchal surroundings; they were only allowed to take care of the household chores of cooking, cleaning, and rearing children who bore their husbands' names rather than them. The patriarchal society disregarded the existence of pregnant mothers who were carrying girls. Women in the

Arab and Arab American worlds were veiled, restricted to their houses, and were not allowed to gain education or independent job. Their patriarchal system prisoned and veiled their minds to diminish them to be regarded as animals carrying their goods without even having a voice to blame or express hatred toward their oppressors.

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