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**SOCIAL STIGMATIZATION AND PENALIZATION OF WOMEN IN
SAADAWI'S THE FALL OF THE IMAM**

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the social stigmatization and punishment of women in *The Fall of the Imam* by Nawal El Saadawi, iconic Egyptian feminist writer who could not remain apathetic to the violence, exclusion and punishment methods developed by the society against women in an environment where people are afraid to speak. In conservative and authoritarian societies, it is quite common for individuals to be restricted and required to live according to strictly defined social norms. If a person acts or behaves in ways outside the boundaries and limits demanded by society, it is highly probable that they will be stigmatized and perhaps even punished by their milieu. On the other hand, the group most adversely affected by this circumstance is women because they are subjected to much more noticeable extent of coercion and oppression than men are. Patriarchal perception lies on the ground of this domination against women. The restrictive structure of patriarchy prevailing in the society is utilized as a kind of control mechanism. Referring to the atmosphere in her country, in particular for women, Saadawi expressly emphasizes that the oppression and domination in her society negatively affect women's lives, the court system is biased against women, and religion is manipulated in favor of men. Women are victims in a male-dominated religious society, they are judged and punished by men in an unfair way, which Saadawi criticizes in her work. The systematic exposure of women to violence, sexual assault and rape, and ultimately death penalty is a stark manifestation of the corruption in society. The unfair punishment practice imposed against women is the key factor triggering this deterioration. Accordingly, Saadawi dwells on the unfair/cruel physical punishment method of stoning in the penalization of women and sheds light on the problem of violence in her novel. On the axis of violence, Saadawi severely criticizes the stereotypical religion-referenced patriarchal structure manipulated against women. By taking into consideration all these elements, in this paper, it is aimed to investigate and represent how women are stigmatized and penalized with death. Accordingly, it is concluded that the stigmatization, marginalization, and ultimately death penalty generated against women as a result of their sexes are based on the patriarchal notion enforced by religion.

Keywords: Saadawi, Women, Stigmatization, Violence, Penalization

**SAADAWI'NİN THE FALL OF THE IMAM ADLI ESERİNDE KADININ
TOPLUMSAL DAMGALANMASI VE CEZALANDIRILMASI**

Öz

Bu çalışma, insanların konuşmaktan çekindiği bir ortamda, içinde bulunduğu toplumun kadınlara karşı geliştirmiş olduğu şiddete, dışlamaya ve cezalandırma yöntemlerine kayıtsız kalamayan Mısırlı feminist yazar Nawal El Saadawi'nin *The Fall of the Imam* adlı eserinde kadınların toplumsal olarak damgalanması ve cezalandırılması konusunu incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Muhafazakâr ve otoriter toplumlarda bireylerin kısıtlanması ve katı bir şekilde belirlenmiş sosyal normlara göre yaşamasının istenmesi oldukça yaygın bir durumdur. Bir kişinin, toplumun talep ettiği sınır ve çizgiler dışında hareket etmesi veya davranması durumunda, çevre tarafından damgalanması ve hatta belki de cezalandırılması da kuvvetle muhtemeldir. Öte yandan, bu durumdan en çok etkilenen kesim kadınlardır çünkü kadınlar erkeklere göre çok daha belirgin ölçüde baskıya ve tahakküme maruz kalmaktadır. Saadawi toplumda hâkim olan baskı ve tahakkümün, kadınların yaşamlarını olumsuz yönde etkilediğini, adalet sisteminin kadınlar aleyhine çalıştığını ve dinin erkekler lehine manipüle edildiğini özellikle vurgulamaktadır. Erkek egemen dini bir toplumda kadınların kurban olmaları ve erkekler tarafından hiç de adil olmayan bir yöntemle yargılanıp cezalandırılmaları Saadawi'nin eserinde

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işlemiş olduğu en temel konudur. Kadınların sistematik bir şekilde şiddete, cinsel saldırı ve tecavüze ve nihayetinde ölüm cezasına maruz kalmaları toplumdaki çürümenin çok açık bir tezahürüdür. Bu çürümenin başında da kadınlara karşı geliştirilen adil olmayan cezalandırma kararları gelmektedir. Bu doğrultuda Saadawi, romanında, şiddet teması özelinde kadınların cezalandırılmasında taşlamanın (recm) fiziksel cezalandırma yöntemi olarak kullanılması üzerinde durmaktadır. Saadawi şiddet temasına vurgu yaparak, kendi toplumunda kemikleşmiş hale gelen kadınların aleyhine olan din referanslı ataerkil yapıyı ciddi derecede eleştirmektedir. Bu çalışmada, tüm bu bahsedilen kavramlar temelinde kadınların damgalanmaları ve ölümlerle cezalandırılmaları incelenmiş olup kadınların maruz kaldıkları baskıcı unsurların gösterilmesi amaçlanmaktadır. İnceleme sonrası, kadınlara cinsiyetleri nedeniyle uygulanan damgalama, ötekileştirme ve nihayetinde ölüm cezası verilmesi durumlarının din ile güçlendirilen ataerkil anlayışa dayandığı sonucuna varılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Saadawi, Kadınlar, Damgalama, Şiddet, Cezalandırma

Introduction

In order for an individual to realize themselves in the process of self-becoming, the effect of the society and the pressure it exerts are the undeniable facts, though these are regarded as external factors regarding their lives. The decisions about their lives, their preferences for being good or bad, and the norms of society, unwritten but seriously felt by the individual, have a major share in an individual's life and future. All individuals in society may be exposed to certain impositions, however, the pressure that society puts on the individual can be more severe and intense for the women. Especially in patriarchal societies with the manipulation of religion in favor of men, women have challenges in carrying out their deeds and are limited in formulating a life of their own. Accordingly, they are constantly embordered by the society, which condemns and punishes them when they cross the line drawn by prevailing notion dominated peculiarly by the men under the disguise of religion. Especially in the work that is the subject of this study, religion is used as a means of oppression against women by referring to Islam. This issue has been the subject of intense debate and scrutiny, with many arguing that Islamic law unfairly discriminates against women and perpetuates their social stigmatization and penalization. However, this interpretation of Islamic law is not universal and there are alternative interpretations that advocate for women's rights within a Muslim context. As Anitta Kynsilehto asserts, "the Qur'an contains principles of gender equality and wider issues of social justice, thus laying grounds for challenging patriarchal traditions" (2008: 10). In other words, it is not the religion but the patriarchal people who oppress the women.

Patriarchy, class, and race are frequently brought up while addressing exploitation of women. However, the subordination of women for various reasons, particularly in third world countries, should be considered not only in terms of class and patriarchy, but also on the axis of religion and society (Bhasin et al, 1998: v). In addition to the laws and restrictions set forth by society's legal system, men with the power to rule can have authority over women by manipulating religion for their favor. Further, referring to the law and religion, they believe it is their right to judge women's behaviors and even to penalize them for their activities. In patriarchal societies gaining power in religious and social terms, this domination of men over women leads to various forms of violence. In third world and developing countries, religious justifications and grounding for violence against women and denial of women's rights are still prevalent (Maher, 2012: 265). Accordingly, as Watts and Zimmerman point out, "violence against women is not only a manifestation of sex inequality, but also serves to maintain this unequal balance of power" (2002: 1232). In her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir also explores the relationship between power, religion, and violence and argues that they are interconnected and reinforce one another in maintaining a patriarchal society. For Beauvoir, men strive to consolidate their power and dominance over women through the religions they manipulate in their own favor by resorting to violence when required and claiming it as a religious element (2012: 11). The relationship between religion and violence, which Beauvoir discusses, is especially seen in countries where religious practices and bigotry are pervasive, and Egypt is the most vivid example of these countries. In such countries, as Zahia Smail Salhi propounds "patriarchy and Islamism shape the political discourse of the ruling elite and have serious repercussions for the ways family laws are constructed and in consequence the manner gender and violence are perceived and tackled" (2013: 1-2). The social structure of Egypt, which heads the systematic exploitation as the patriarchal domination gains strength together with religion and politics, epitomizes Beauvoir's argument. As Egyptian researcher Rabab Azzam puts forward, due to a patriarchal cultural tradition that has been based on discriminating against women in most aspects of life, women in Egypt continue to experience internalized social violence (2022). Academician Nermin Allam also draws attention to this problem and argues that "in Egypt, women have been largely marginalized from the political process and violence against women not only resumed but also escalated to unprecedented levels" (2018: 142). As Egyptian iconic feminist writer Nawal El Saadawi explicitly highlights in *The Fall of the Imam* with the image of The Imam, who deliberately utilizes and manipulates religion for his own political gains, religion turns out to be a weapon in the hands of men and the authorities.

In religiously male dominated societies, like Egypt, as Paludi and Ellens state, "the male is perceived as normative; the female is regarded as a deviation from the norm" (2016: xxii). With regard to this notion, the idea of keeping the woman under control and shaping her life according to male-dominated norms

develops. Male-dominated society imposes certain norms on women, such as the requirement that women submit to males in their families, the normality of male control, the right of men to penalize women, the normality of male sexual harassment, the right of men to interfere with women's clothing, assigned roles for women, and the mispricing of widow women. When imposing these coercive conventions, men consistently make reference to religion. However, despite the blatant manipulation of religion in favor of men in setting social norms, as De-Gaia verbalizes, some "Islamic scholars have argued the egalitarian nature of Islam stipulated by the Qur'an in affording men and women the same rights and obligations insofar as they all believe and live according to the dictates of the Qur'an" (2019: 69). Despite this well-accepted belief, Muslim women in many Muslim countries are subjected to male coercion despite their efforts to pursue Islamic rules. The major cause for this problem is not religion per se, but rather the male-dominated society that suffocates women under the guise of religion. The fact that women do not have their own history in real life, or so they were told and believed (Lerner, 1986: 222), is the most fundamental component in this way of isolating and neglecting Muslim women. As a result of the systematic neglect, these women yield to the notion that "they had no future opportunities since they had no history" (1986: 222). Men's desire for privileged power and lack of necessary respect for women are the main causes of the loss in women's future hopes. For instance, in Egypt, as Qasim Amin utters, though "the political laws stipulate that they should all enjoy their freedom and legal rights, whether men or women, men have deeply rooted in their nature a love of exclusive power over the privileges of freedom and a lack of respect for the rights of women" (2005: 127). To eliminate this problem existing in religiously patriarchal societies, as Sheila Jeffrey sets forth, "intervention is needed in the religious fiefdoms that patriarchs create to establish their control if transformative equality for women and girls is to be achieved" (2012: 192). For the Muslim reformers like Muhammed Abduh and Ahmad Lutfi as-Sayyid believing a need for the intervention, the discussion for the necessity of women's liberation commenced. According to Thomas Philipp, their point was that a properly deciphered and unencumbered Islam could assure a long-term system of ideas and values, even in today's shifting conditions. Accordingly, they also believed that women's rights had been impeded, not by the original Islamic precepts, but by a misreading of the Qur'an and later modifications (1978: 278). Because of these ideas, reformist Islamic scholars are at odds with conventional Islamic scholars. The punishment of stoning for adultery is one of the most significant issues where reformist and conventional Islamic scholars disagree.

Except the abovementioned scholars diverging from the traditional Islamic scholars, the stare decisis for adultery in Islam is the punishment of stoning, which is the focus of this study. The widespread consensus on the subject of stoning is that it serves as a deterrent force/element to prevent bad/immoral acts taking place in society. For this reason, stoning as a punishment method for adultery, which is one of the major sins in Islam, is deemed appropriate to prevent social unrest. On the other hand, since "there is inherent difficulty in proving adultery due to the high evidentiary requirements" (Korbatieh, 2018: 10), it is not so easy to apply this punishment. However, punishing without any solid evidence is evident in the novel. Despite the recommendations not to apply the punishment of stoning without concrete evidence, female characters are stoned to death in *The Fall of the Imam*.

Contrary to the manipulation of Islamic rules in the novel, stoning¹ is seen as a deterrent measure in preventing serious crimes/sinful actions and maintaining social order rather than being used as a punishment tool in Islam. For this reason, in order to charge someone of adultery, at least four trustworthy witnesses must testify that they have seen the defendant committing the crime of adultery (The Qur'an, 4:15; 24:4; Peters, 2005: 14). There are very few authentically reported cases of stoning in hadiths, which supports that the method of stoning is used as a salient mechanism to prevent incitement to crime/sin, rather than being a means of punishment. Further, no direct expression of stoning is mentioned in the Qur'an. However, the hadith on Maez² and Ghamidiyyah about the punishment of stoning indicates that stoning was applied as a result of the jurisprudence of Islamic scholars. Regardless of this hadith and Islamic rules on the practice of stoning, the women's actions in *The Fall of the Imam* have not been examined according to the criteria specified and determined by Islam, and it is unclear whether such a crime/sin exists. The character accused of adultery denies all charges, and the lack of four credible witnesses to claim that she committed this crime indicates that she cannot be stoned. Despite this fact, the Imam's men persecute people and especially women

by taking religion as a reference. Saadawi, growing up in a Muslim climate and is well aware of the requirements of the Islamic religion, criticizes the corruption in her own society and especially the negative attitude developed against women. Saadawi explores these themes in the context of a fictional Muslim society. Deconstructing the prevailing patriarchal/conventional notion about women, as Morny Joy argues, Saadawi tries to “construct a worldview that honors their new-found integrity, and that acknowledges their powers of both reasoning and imagination” (2006: 35). For this reason, Saadawi's novel can be seen as trailblazing work for the emancipation of women. Her novel serves as a powerful critique of the patriarchal structures that often dominate Muslim societies and highlights the need for greater awareness and action towards creating a more equitable society for women within the context of Islamic law.

Social Stigmatization and Penalization of Women in *The Fall of the Imam*

If nothing else is left, one must scream. Silence is the real crime against humanity.

Nadezhda Mandelstam, 1983

In conservative and authoritarian countries like Egypt, it is widespread for an individual to be constrained and obliged to live in conformity with the strictly set social norms. Accordingly, they are stigmatized and perhaps even punished if they conduct or behave in a way that is outside the boundaries accepted by the society. When it comes to women, in particular, the corrosive pressure and dominance spurred by rigid social rules is much worse than it is for men, in terms of religious and legal rules. Nawal El Saadawi's novel *The Fall of the Imam* is a vivid and concrete epitome of this problem originating from the manipulation of religion and law against women.

Saadawi crafts a non-linear plot with multiple narrators in her work, which deals with the predicament of women living under oppressive regimes. Direct allusions to actual Egyptian events, including the assassination of Egyptian leader Anwar Sadat, can be found in the overtly political story that emphasizes the draconian regime there. Saadawi alludes to the assassination of Sadat by referring to the murder of the Imam on a platform³. Drawing attention to the injustice, violence and systematic oppression of women who are assaulted and raped in the country under Imam's rule, Saadawi especially accentuates the political corruption having the most devastating effect on Egyptian women. While pursuing it, she employs a female character, Bint Allah (Daughter of God), to narrate her story as a rebellion against the traditional lifestyle and ideology. Even the name of the character she created has a meaning that cannot be accepted by her society. With a questioning nature, Bint Allah attempts to live in a world where most people have given up on using their minds; she opposes their artificiality (Saadawi, 2002: 45). Bint Allah's distinctive and peculiar personality is out of the standard for the environment in which not the mind but the body of a woman is prioritized. Contrary to the patriarchal, credulous and submissive members of her society and the perception of women as body, Bint Allah is represented as mind, strongly and believably voicing her thoughts.

By means of conspicuous attention and with the blurring transition into the stories of the female characters and repetitive scenes, Saadawi uncovers the awful fact that violence against women occurs in a remorseless and systematic way. However, she is well aware that, as Mamdouh Adwan asserts, “no poem, no piece of music can overthrow a dictator. But, it can resist the normalization of oppression” (qtd. in Cooke, 2017: 120). She believes that writing, as Cooke defined, “is a vital weapon in the fight to establish justice within such an autocratic system” (2001: 75). By means of her literary weapon, Saadawi strongly criticizes the corruption and hypocrisy in her homeland. With her emphasis on the regime's mistreatment of women, she also elaborates the problems of arranged marriages/virginity (the marriage between the Leader of the Official Opposition and daughter of a State Minister), punishment for the adultery and the violence resorted to the women. With the details in apple-pie order, Saadawi stresses “deeply-rooted fear of the ruling authority” (father/husband/state) (Saadawi, 1994: 3). She portrays the herd as submissive and obedient to the head of state on the one hand, while creating a strong and challenging female character in the form of Bint Allah on the other. However, it should be noted that although Saadawi creates a female figure powerful enough to confront the established political corruption, no one can easily survive in such a brutal society, and Bint Allah cannot also withstand the oppressive power of the existing authority.

At the opening pages of the novel, Saadawi vividly demonstrates the violence that the tyrannical authority exerts on Bint Allah. The following lines show how the Imam's men punished her: "They hunted her down after chasing her all night. Something hit her in the back" (Saadawi, 2002: 13). Saadawi likens the attackers to the hunters preying on an animal, that means, Bint Allah is nothing more than an animal for the Imam's men. The other severe criticism Saadawi directs to them is their attitude towards Bint Allah. She underlines that "they do not know how to fight, have no honor, have no pride, they always hit you from behind" (2002: 13). Bint Allah's incredulity about the malfeasance of those who persecuted her is palpable in the following lines. She asks: "Why do they always let the criminal go free and punish the victim?" (2002: 13). Their response to this uncommon/unexpected question is as follows: "You are the child of sin and your mother was stoned to death" (2002: 13). This response illustrates that they stoned the women they suspected of adultery to death. They also refuse to allow that woman's child to move on because a child born as a result of adultery must be punished for her mother's alleged sin/crime⁴. The society's perspective and punishment preferences claiming to act in accordance with Islamic principles and rules do not sync up with Islam, nevertheless, individuals who submit to authority and have almost lost their ability to question act in the direction of their own interest/desires under the name of Islam and punish innocent people with no proof. Upon Bint Allah confessing that she is the Imam's daughter, they immediately decide to penalize her and cut her tongue first, because that is how the leader they obey deems appropriate. Following quotation clarifies the final destination of Bint Allah: "In the deathly silence of those moments they killed her" (2002: 17). Saadawi interprets the actions of these ignorant people, referring to the Prophet Muhammad's hadith as follows: "why should God be angry with them? They do not know. They do not know what crimes they have committed" (2002: 18). Saadawi assumes that they behave in that way because people roaming in herds do not read the book of their religion, in which their god states what he expects from them. If they had read and understood their holy scripture, their cruelty and brutal punishment, especially against women, would have dissipated. However, on the contrary, since they believed that the Imam was knowledgeable about everything and had communication with God, they surrendered all their will under the authority of the Imam and preferred to live according to his orders. As Diala-Ogamba stresses: "The Imam has indoctrinated the people into believing in him as God's direct messenger, thus making them incapable of questioning him" (2021: 46). The fact that they lead a life of pure obedience without questioning has caused them to stigmatize and penalize women mercilessly. Repetitively revealing the violence and cruelty that women are exposed to throughout the novel, Saadawi ventilates the seriousness of the brutality with the following expressions:

They tied me with ropes, and threw me in a pit, then hurled stones at me, one stone following another, day after day, one day following another until fifty days had passed, or a hundred, or a thousand. My body died, but my spirit would not give up. They were worn out by so much stone-throwing, and I could see their hands hanging limply at their sides, the blood dripping from their fingers drop by drop, but my arteries were not emptied yet. My spirit inhaled dust and sand, turned my body into rock, made the stones bounce off. (2002: 20)

The reason behind Saadawi's detailed coverage of this heinous violence experienced by women and the emphasis on the use of stoning as a penalization method is to reveal how the tyrannical dictator and oppressive regimes manipulate the power against people, peculiarly women. For the great majority of men, women are seen as "a wretched creature possessing nothing but a body to be sold for the price of a meal" (2002: 40). Accordingly, for The Imam, "a woman is a body, and apart from that nothing in her appeals to him" (2002: 107). For this reason, according to them, there is nothing wrong with stoning a woman to death for whatever the reason is because she is viewed as a material that can only be purchased and sold.

Saadawi reiterates that people who take on the role of God actually punish women by means of stoning under the name of God's orders, and this makes women truly victims. Referring to the rape incident of Shahbani Shiraz's little daughter by jailers, Saadawi states that the people in power violate women in various ways, and as an absurd consequence, not men but women are punished. The event⁵ recounted by Nemat Allah to Bint Allah is the clearest illustration of this circumstance. The following story is what Nemat Allah tells about her mother:

When her belly grew big she put on a wide flowing robe in order to hide what had happened. One night, when everyone was fast asleep, she gave birth to her child; but the eyes of the Imam, always wide

awake, saw everything. They took her away, tied her with a rope of hemp, put her in an open space and started to stone her to death, one stone after the other, without haste, until she died. (2002: 23)

Bint Allah's query in response to this anecdote is quite thought-provoking, and it demonstrates how incorrect the prevalent perception held by society may be. She asks and questions: "But if God was the cause, why did they stone your mother to death?" (2002: 23). With this point of view and criticism that traditional belief has been falsified, Saadawi reveals that women are turned into victims because of the religious patriarchal view, and these aggressive attitudes and behaviors developed against women do not coincide with the essence and verses of the Islam.

The men in her society call themselves true Muslims despite engaging in activities that are against Islam. Furthermore, they regard themselves as god-like figures. Therefore, this (absolute power of god) encourages them to treat women as a sort of property and to punish them anytime they wish. This predicament is best expressed by Saadawi as follows: "To obey God is an unbreakable law and without obedience to father and husband there can be no obedience to God" (2002: 34). Based on a religiously patriarchal notion, men regard themselves as equal to God and expect women to show their obedience, which is an indicator of the negative and oppressive attitude developed against women. When the Leader of the oppositional party realized that his wife was not a virgin when he got married, he beat his wife until she confessed, and thus became her god. Because of the violence resorted to her, "she worshipped him, chose to be at his feet like a dog, and now he possessed her completely" (2002: 41). This proves that men perceive women as a material to be possessed and use violence as a control mechanism to ensure absolute obedience. Such people actually establish empires of fear over their wives in their own homes, like the Imam who is in charge of the country, and become Imams of their own houses on a micro basis. They presume that they cannot dominate their spouses without fear, therefore, they create a system based on fear and violence that is far from the axis of love and compassion, because "without fear, no ruler, no Imam, can remain on the throne" (2002: 49). Women have also become accustomed to being relegated to a subordinate status in the society and in their own homes as a result of this climate of fear and violence. The Imam's wife's identification of women as reptiles and snakes (2002: 52) also reveals her acceptance of an inferior role⁶. When women recognize this secondary position and do not react to violence, it gives the authority (husband/father) the idea and power to dominate and wield women under their protection. Imam, for example, considers himself as such a powerful and absolute ruler that he even deems it permissible/appropriate to rape his own daughter⁷. The Imam asserts that "a daughter would never kill her father even if he rapes her like a wolf" (2002: 52). His notion is inappropriate for the essence of religion and does not exactly correspond to Islam, which demonstrates how far the authority and its believers have drifted from religion. The Imam's perception dominating in the society even allows them to rape their own daughters, further, to kill them when they feel it is required. However, what is intriguing and startling here is that religion and God are referenced while performing all these actions. They utilize religious motives and God to avoid taking responsibility for their own acts. They reckon that their bad deeds are due to God's will.

When the novel is analyzed in a holistic way, it can be observed that women were charged and stigmatized with undesirable characteristics/behaviors before being punished with stones. According to the Imam and his men, Bint Allah "was certainly a devil of a girl and the daughter of a devil of a woman and that both of them had been born in sin" (2002: 116). Despite the fact that women and girls are victims, they are stigmatized with immorality and evil, and they are marginalized by society. Saadawi depicts this circumstance via the lenses of female characters reduced to both victim and perpetrator. It is perceived that these women are punished with cutting and stoning methods, especially on the grounds of virginity and immorality. Saadawi urges upon the impropriety of these methods and the understanding of justice. She also raises her concerns and criticisms on the issue that women do not feel safe in both Islamic and official law. When Bint Allah asked for a public trial against the crimes perpetrated against her, this request was not welcomed by the judge. The restraint/coercion women face seeking their rights and lack of justice suppress their struggle against injustice and also prevents their process of self-being. As Merl Bonney claims "an individual "has a need to learn, to love, and to be assertive. If these needs are denied or frustrated on a low level, as they often are, the person is denied the completion of his potentials" (1974: 329). Egyptian women

like Bint Allah are unable to reach their potential due to the restrictive environment imposed on them and are even punished with violence to be kept under control. Furthermore, because of the pressure exerted on them, women transform into silent figures, which makes men to violate them even more. Men, being aware of this subaltern and secondary position of women incapable of claiming their rights in any legal and religious context, readily resort to violence against women.

Conclusion

At a time when nobody else was talking, Saadawi spoke the unspeakable.

Margaret Atwood

Nawal El Saadawi is a venturesome writer expressing fearlessly and sharply what cannot be said in an oppressive society and period. She mainly brought up issues such as femininity, sexuality, violence and exclusion against women, and the restrictive effect of religion on women, which are seen as taboos in Arab countries and are deemed inappropriate to explore. Her stirring and eloquent work, *The Fall of the Imam*, is a rallying cry against men who oppress women through the pretext of religion. As a rebellion against all this manipulation, hypocrisy and injustice, Saadawi strongly verbalized that “nothing is more perilous than truth in a world that lies” (Saadawi, 1994: 203).

Saadawi highlights her criticism over the physical punishment method, stoning, in the penalization of women by directly addressing the element of violence in her novel. She argues that the stigmatization, exclusion, and eventually punishment generated against women because of their sexes are based on the society’s dominant power relations. The ruling government and regime, according to Saadawi, are the causes for the oppressive and gloomy atmosphere in which women live. In her novel, she heartily opposes the punishment of women, especially by accusing them of concepts such as unchastity, adultery, and immorality on the ground of manipulated religion in her own society. She makes us feel that religious extremism is the greatest threat to women’s liberation worldwide (Khaleeli, 2010). Saadawi’s criticism also demonstrates how the regime leverages religious beliefs in her community for political gain. As stated in her novel, the Imam and his men do not have sufficient knowledge about the religion they declare to believe, and people imprudently obey the authority in charge without questioning. Saadawi repudiates religious and political corruption, particularly against women, and rejects the penalization method against women.

Saadawi contends that the major source of violence against women is the power structure because the power and religion have a direct relationship; the former aids and abets the latter, resulting in repression particularly for women. With her novel on the axis of power and religion, Saadawi sharply attacks the leader and his men’s hypocrisy and the way women are punished without proper trial. She repeatedly refers to the victimization of women with a narrative style that is significantly distinct from a classical novel, leaving a hazy and stunning impression on the reader. Using binary characters (the Imam as powerful and mother/daughter as weak) in her novel, she accentuates that life is completely divergent in terms of the oppressor and the oppressed, and the power transforms the oppressor’s life into a paradise while the oppressed experience hell. Within the borders of this hell, Saadawi revealing physical violence in its most heinous form also sheds light on the sexual assault and rape that women are exposed to. In fact, with the wolf story told by Imam, she remarks that the dominance of patriarchal power can sometimes even lead to incest relations. In essence, her story is a snapshot of the corruption that characterizes a horrific extremist-religious regime utilizing power and religion to commit violence by means of brutal penalization techniques. Accordingly, the novel is mainly concerned with the prospect of female insurrection against a vitriolic and violent patriarchy invigorated by religion.

Endnotes

¹ Although most Islamic scholars such as Abu Hanifa, Al-Shafi’i and Abu Yusuf acknowledge stoning as a punishment method, it is still a contentious matter. Some Islamic scholars- like Muhammad Abu Zahra, an Egyptian philosopher

and authority on crime and punishment under Islamic law- believe that the death penalty of stoning does not coincide with Islam.

² Narrated Nuaym ibn Huzzal and quoted in Abu Dawud's *Prescribed Punishments*: Maez ibn Malik had illicit sexual relations with a slave girl. Then he goes to the Prophet Muhammad to talk about the sin he has committed. When he tells the prophet that he has committed adultery, the prophet sends him, but when Maez tells his sin for the fourth time, he is sentenced to stoning by the prophet (Dawud, n.d.).

³ On the cover page of Saadawi's *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*, the publisher asserts that Anwar Sadat incarcerated Saadawi because of crimes against the state and she was in prison until he was assassinated (Saadawi, 1994: cover page).

⁴ In Islamic Law, the notion of individual criminal responsibility is crucial. Only the criminals themselves can be held liable for the crimes they commit. Regardless of what kind of affinity they have with the criminal, those who do not commit crimes are regarded as innocent and they cannot be punished because of someone's crime. The Qur'an contains passages that convey this circumstance plainly. The 15th verse of Surah Al-Isra is the first of them. "No soul burdened with sin will bear the burden of another. And We would never punish a people until We have sent a messenger" (The Qur'an, 17:15). Similarly, the theme of the crime's individuality is addressed quite clearly in the 164th verse of Surah Al An'am. "Each soul is responsible for its own actions; no soul will bear the burden of another" (The Qur'an, 6:164). The following hadith reported by Abu Dawud in *Types of Blood-Wit* also supports this attitude: "You should know that a person is punished only for his own crime. The father cannot be punished for the crime of the child, and the son cannot be punished for the crime of the father" (Dawud, n.d.).

⁵ It is an allusion to the story of the Virgin Mary. "But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus" (Today's New International Version, 1993: Luke: 30-31).

⁶ "Woman was created from a twisted rib and is lacking in both faith and mind" (Saadawi, 2002: 146).

⁷ Saadawi calls attention to the corruption in her own society with this comment.

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