

## PATRIARCHY IN WOMAN AT POINT ZERO

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### ABSTRACT

For centuries, male domination over women has been regarded as a norm in many parts of the world. This has led to different forms of discrimination and exclusion of women as active participants of society. They are often portrayed as voiceless, vulnerable and are in most cases given passive roles which always keep them inferior to men. For this reason, Nawal El Saadawi exposes how patriarchy in the form of male dominance over women manifests in society by adopting the story of a female victim.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Dominance, Authority, Marginalization, Subordination.

According to Kaur (2009), women constitute the majority of the world's population but there is no society in which women enjoy full equality with men. This is due to the perceived superiority that men often possess over women or patriarchy. To some extent, we can say that patriarchy and religion are intertwined because the origin of men dominance over women has always been attributed to nature and religion. As it is stated in the Bible, the first human who was ever created was a man and that a woman was created from the ribs of a man, Genesis 2:22 (Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man and he brought her to the man). If God made a woman and brought her to a man, that is to say, that nature did not give full authority to women to be independent but to live under the care of a man. Rakoczy (2004) adds that Patriarchy is interwoven in the Christian tradition in distinct and pervasive ways. The images of God in Scripture and liturgical prayer are overwhelmingly male: Lord, King, Father. The oppression of women through patriarchal social structures increases in the religious context since the presumed 'maleness' of God and the male identity of Jesus is used to justify women's subordination. Other Bible verses also advocate for women's submissiveness before men: 1 Timothy 2:12 (I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet.)

In the Quran, there are also certain verses that also assert men's privileges and authority over women. Kazemi (2000) points out that from one point of view, Islam is praised for its liberating role for women in Arabia and elsewhere while another perspective holds either the religion or some of its practices and practitioners accountable for the lower status and inferior legal rights of women in Islamic countries than other parts of the world.

In Quran 4:34, it is written that men are in charge of women by right of what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend for maintenance from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in the husband's absence what Allah would have them, guard. But those wives from whom you fear arrogance - first advise them; then if they persist, forsake them in bed; and finally, strike them. But if they obey you once more, seek no means against them. Indeed, Allah is ever Exalted and Grand. Also in Quran 2:228, it states

emphatically that men have the same rights as women in marriage, however, men have a higher authority over them. "Women who are divorced shall wait, keeping themselves apart, three monthly courses. And it is not lawful for them that they should conceal that which Allah hath created in their wombs if they are believers in Allah and the Last Day. And their husbands would do better to take them back in that case if they desire a reconciliation. And they women have rights similar to those of men over them in kindness, and men are a degree above them. Allah is Mighty, Wise." Due to these religious and other societal influences, many women are being marginalized, deprived of their rights and respect, and are in most cases, only considered important for procreation and for their feminine role in homes. In India for instance, Kosambi (1988) states that the elements of patriarchy a century ago were as they are today derived from the ancient sacred texts and hallowed by tradition and custom. The Brahmanical texts emphasized the supremacy of men, and the procreation of male descendants as the most important goal in life, assigning women a passive role as a vehicle for the production of sons. Also in an article written by The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, they state that in Egypt, public space is very clearly defined belonging to men with women not cohabitating but rather infiltrating the space as outsiders made to live in accordance with parameters set by men. It is therefore not surprising that Nawal El Saadawi brings out how the reality of patriarchal authority in Egypt manifests in her book. According to Walby (1989), patriarchy is a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women. The use of the term social structure here is described as important since it implies a rejection of both biological determinism and the notion that every individual man is in a dominant position and every individual woman in a subordinate one. In his article, Ruby (2003) also explains patriarchy as a form of society where men's needs, concerns, and interests are central; where a family's children are named after the father, not the mother, and the authority of the father/husband over both wife and children is revered. Any society that puts every man in a dominant position and puts every woman in a subordinate one will not triumph because it will not offer the same opportunity to both men and women and it will fail to recognize women's contribution to society.

In patriarchy, the authority that men possess allows them to prey on women and children and put them in a state of vulnerability without paying particular attention to their rights. We estimate that the author named this book *Woman at Point Zero* because it depicts the status of how women are reduced to nothing by the patriarchal authority which they are unable to battle with. This work, therefore, discusses how patriarchy manifests itself in *Woman at Point Zero* in the family, government, and society.

First and foremost, we shall discuss familial patriarchy in the book. It is a generally established fact that men are always considered as the head of families in many societies around the world. Within the families portrayed in the book, men who have authority as heads of families abuse this power to the detriment of the well-being of women and children. Within their family as a child, Firdaus witnessed how her mother was being maltreated physically by her father: "His voice was low, with a slight hoarseness which reminded me of my father. After he had eaten his meal and beaten my mother and calmed down, he would ask me, 'Are you hungry?'" (101) Firdaus goes on to indicate her father's cruelty by indicating that her father used to occupy the oven room in winter and leave her the coldest room in the house. (104) As head of the family, it is his duty to use his authority to provide love and care for everyone. Every loving father who cares about his children will keep his children warm

from extreme cold and make sure they do not go hungry. In the case of Firdaus's father that was not the case. He gained pleasure in punching his wife and tormenting his children because he knows his wife and children are under his authority and has to submit to him. This in most cases has been the plight of women and children in homes where they have no voices. An attempt to stand up for your right will be regarded as disrespect which may come with consequences. We realize that Firdaus's uncle is no exception of a family head who uses his authority to abuse his family. Firdaus indicates that her uncle had a bed to himself, while she slept on the wooden couch. (104) Even after secondary school, Firdaus's uncle did not find it necessary taking her to the university. As a young woman, her uncle rather prefers to put her into an unwanted marriage as a way of getting rid of her and indirectly selling her into a marriage of emotional torture: "We will never find a better husband for her than Sheikh Mahmoud. Do you think Sheikh .for a big dowry." (83) She is pushed into a marriage where she experiences the act of masculine superiority over her life. "when I married, my husband ate twice as much food as I did, yet his eyes never lifted themselves from my plate." (104) It appears that the men described in Firdaus's immediate family failed in their responsibilities as head of families. Even though Firdaus's father, uncle, and husband consider themselves respectable Muslims, they failed to observe the Islamic code of hafaah which is supposed to serve as a protection for women by granting them equality before their husband. They only used their authority to cause pain and suffering to the women and children in their families. According Rashid-Feroze (1962), the doctrine of hafaah (equality) in Egypt is considered as one of the essentials of a valid Muslim marriage. Every woman's freedom to marry is subject to the rules of equality mentioned in the text of the code, as well as the stipulation of mahr. If those who are supposed to provide immediate protection to women and children turn against them and deny them love and protection, how then will the outside world provide the love and care which is not found in the home? We estimate that Firdaus's decision to become a street girl in the early stages of her life was motivated by the lack of compassion and love she did not receive from home and the man she married. In her quest to find peace and purpose in her life, she imagined that the outside world could become a safe haven for her. Unfortunately for her, the male domination that she runs away from is not just a problem peculiar to her home. Bayoumi under the guise of helping her ended up assaulting her physically as a result of a lack of respect for her personality as a woman: "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. I kept my eyes closed and abandoned my body. It lay there under him without movement, emptied of all desire, or pleasure, or even pain, feeling nothing." (108)

In Sub-Saharan Africa for instance where patriarchy is widely practiced, many young women like Firdaus find themselves in many arranged and unwanted marriages. In such places, it is often believed that a woman's place is on a man's bed and in the kitchen so many families do not make any effort to invest in women and in their girl children since they are considered of less value than men. The strong women who nevertheless make the effort to break the societal obstacles in their lives suffer many setbacks from men in an attempt to put them at the bottom of the ladder.

Again, we realize that patriarchy in the book is not a just problem found within the family setting.

Sudarkasa (1986) states that whenever most writers compared "the lot" of women and men in Africa, they ascribed to men a better situation, a higher status. Women were depicted as saddled with home and domesticity; men were portrayed as enjoying the exhilaration of life in the outside world. The female domination and lack of respect for women is also a problem found among men in authority and in government. They use their authority to abuse and suppress women to get what they want from them. In Firdaus's workplace, many female employees are forced to give themselves sexually to their bosses for different kinds of favors: "An employee is scared of losing her job and becoming a prostitute because she does not understand that the prostitute's life is in fact better than hers. And so she pays the price of her illusory fears with her life, her health, her body, and her mind. She pays the highest price for things of the lowest value. I now knew that all of us were prostitutes who sold themselves at varying prices and that an expensive prostitute was better than a cheap one" (157) In most cases, women who encounter this kind of challenges in their workplaces do not talk about it or report it to the appropriate authorities as a result of lack of support and fear of being blackmailed or expelled. Firdaus also talks about her experience with a police officer who instead of using his authority to protect the vulnerable and helpless in the society uses his authority to satisfy his sexual fantasies: "He said, 'I'll pay you. Don't think I want to have you for nothing. I am not like other policemen. How much do you want?' 'How much do I want? I don't know.' 'Don't play games with me, and don't try to haggle with me either, or I'll take you off to the police station.'" (130) If the policeman says I'm not like other policemen, it makes it clear that other policemen have been committing this sort of crime against women. In one way or the other, we believe that the oppression of women perpetrated by people in authority is a result of their experience with how women are treated in general in their homes and in their immediate surroundings. People who experience female domination as kids grow up believing that a woman cannot be treated equally to a man. It looks as if the men in authority have an outrageous hatred and disregard for women. They control the bodies, minds, and conscience and deny them their free will to make choices for themselves: "A man cannot stand being rejected by a woman, because deep down inside he feels a rejection of himself." (183) This implies that when a man in authority expresses an interest in a woman, he denies her the respect to make a choice because of the perceived power that these men have over women. They make it look as if it is their right to possess every woman of their choosing without the woman objecting to their wishes: "One day a very important personality from a foreign state heard about me. He arranged things in such a way that he could look me over without my noticing. Immediately after he sent for me, but I refused to go. I knew that successful politicians cannot bear to accept defeat in front of others, probably because they always carry defeat within themselves." (183) When a woman's right is being abused and faces this kind of pressure and discrimination over a long period of time she begins to develop a bad impression about her feminine gender and accepts her fate as being disadvantaged or unfortunate by the definition of her gender. This sort of frustration pushed Firdaus to conclude that a woman's life is always miserable. (182) Bunch (1990) argues that many violations of women's human rights are distinctly connected to being female-that is, women are discriminated against and abused on the basis of gender. When women experience persistent discrimination in the hands of men, they develop hatred for them and see all men as evil. As Firdaus remarks: "I became aware of the fact that I hated men, but for long years had hidden this secret carefully. The men I hated most of all were those who tried to give me advice or told me that they wanted to rescue me from the life I was leading. I used to hate them more than the others because they thought they were better than I was and could help

me change my life.” (181) When there is too much mistrust and gender imbalances in a society, it becomes difficult the creation of a harmonious environment where men and women can depend on each other. The kind of society that the author describes in the book is the one that supports the patriarchal notion of women's powerlessness and vulnerability. The one where men force women to work to enrich themselves at their expense: “I was nothing but a body machine working day and night so that a number of men belonging to different professions could become immensely rich at my expense.” (193) This act of forced labor is similar to slavery but in the sight of the law, these wrongdoers go unpunished because of their identity as men: “Then I had recourse to legal proceedings. I found out that the law punishes women like me but turns a blind eye to what men do.” (189) Fortunately, many women today have become conscious of the gender biases against them and certain unfair societal male privileges which always put them at point zero. Some feminine movements have also risen to struggle for equal rights to put an end to male domination which has become a stumbling block to the liberation of women in certain parts of the globe. In Africa where patriarchy is predominantly practiced, Roberts (1983) adds that contemporary women's movements in Africa have been formed during recent or continuing struggles for national liberation which has shaped their reflection on the subordination of women.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we assume that the problem of gender disparities between men and women can hugely be blamed on the influences of society, culture, and religion since they mostly promote women's subordination before men. Again, in some communities, culture and religion have set standards by prescribing certain roles as masculine and feminine. Some professions for example are tagged with certain genders hence people who enter into it suffer all forms of discrimination on the basis of their gender. However, if all women become self-conscious of their rights and abilities, they will be equally capable of gaining authority and accomplishing successes in every aspect of their lives.

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