

Deconstructing Marriage and Motherhood in Chaos of the Senses and In the Eye of the Sun



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Introduction:

In the Arab world, the idea of the domestication and objectification of women, as biological and cultural reproducers of the nation is tremendously emphasized. According to this tendency, the Arab woman's role in her national community has been historically embedded in the household, as bearers of national and cultural authenticity. Men, on the contrary, are cast as unsurpassed heroes with the burden of making the nation. Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias assert that women's sexuality is vital to the national process, where women are seen mainly within the role of transmitting culture, as mothers of the nation. This, they contend, leads to limitations on the role women have within the na-

tion, a role which is underpinned by the state apparatus. Albeit the newest emancipative and disciplinary trends initiated in most Arab states guaranteed women a space of freedom and taking part in public and political spheres, patronizing patriarchal regulations have been unceasingly set to curtail and discredit any effective participation of women in the public life. Since a nation's artistic productions are deemed to be the output and projection of its historical, social and cultural tapestry, the Arab literary national narratives, mainly male-dominated, commonly portray men as the chief protagonists whereas woman appears merely as symbolic national objects, dutiful housewives or sacrificial mothers transmitting the national culture to the next generation.

Being conscious that such a process of national discourse dismembers the Arab woman by neglecting her agency in shaping her national community, contemporary Arab women writers have vehemently developed and employed a number of prolific narrative strategies in their fictional writings to counteract such androcentric figurations of the Arab woman. Therefore, being immensely affected by the growing feminist school of thoughts in the Western world, those female figures yield a totally different and even sometimes 'unconventional' image of the Arab woman in crafting complex, highly individualized and fully developed female characters that perform a wide variety of roles in their communities. Gradually they have moved from mirroring Arab women's oppressive subservient position under male authority, to voicing their worries and aspirations and towards a process of deconstructing the patriarchal matrimonial role assigned to them. In this light, those women writers, namely the ones I have selected to discuss in this paper: the Algerian Ahlam Mosteghanemi and the Anglo-Egyptian Ahdaf Soueif, in their fictional narratives criticize women's location in domesticity

by voicing loud their womanhood and intellectual agency, re-inscribing them in the process as subjects rather than passive objects in the national agenda.

With fixed assigned roles of wifehood and motherhood, transmitting the national traditional culture to the future citizens of the nation within the seclusion of the household, Arab woman tends to lose her right in being an equal participant in the public realm, wielding her share in the national vocation. Therefore, the present paper attempts to debunk the discursive narrative strategies deployed by Mosteghanemi and Soueif in their respective novels *Chaos of the Senses* (2015) and *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992) to subvert the Arab masculine national discourse. Both authors resort to deconstructing the traditional conventional vision of the Arab woman as the devout wife and the traditional mother by speaking out their heroines' femininity (through extramarital affairs), childlessness and intellectual productivity in their national communities.

1. Deconstructing Marriage and the Image of the Devout Wife:

In *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, Nawal El Saadawi ascertains that in Arab societies, a girl “is trained and educated right from the start to shrink into a corner, to 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.” In this statement, El Saadawi sums up the situation of the Arab woman who is prepared since her infancy for her ascribed marital role which implies her passivity in the household and submission to the patriarch.

In their novels, *Chaos of the Senses* and *In the Eye of the Sun*, both Mosteghanemi and Soueif create female characters that are well educated, intelligent, unhappy and unfulfilled in their marriages; yet with successful professional careers which place them well in their societies: Hayat, a novelist and Asya, a university professor.

Hayat’s marriage from the military officer, though greatly arranged and sanctified by her uncle Si Sharif as a good bargain, could never happen beyond her will. She

adventently admits the prescribed wifely role even as a mere secondary wife. In the same way, Asya’s marriage to Saif Madi is utterly her own choice which initially comes beyond her academic parents’ advice who long wish their daughter to hold an academic degree prior to wedlock.

In effect, through their heroines Hayat and Asya, both Mosteghanemi and Soueif are intent to accentuate the extent to which marriage as a valued societal institution in Arab societies infiltrates the psychological mainframe of women. Even those female intellectuals with academic careers, ordained to have their own autonomous lives, prove themselves preys to the system which overwhelmingly stresses the substantiality of marriage as an inescapable fate to Arab women. Hayat and Asya appear to value marriage as a means of social security and amalgamation as elucidated in the French feminist Simone De Beauvoir’s statement: “for girls, marriage is the only means of integration in the community, and if they remain unwanted, they are, socially viewed, so much wastage. This is why mothers have always eagerly sought to arrange marriages for them.” The theorist

further underscores the momentous of marriage for women by stating that “marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. ...The celibate woman is to be explained and defined with reference to marriage, whether she is frustrated, rebellious, or even indifferent in regard to that institution.”

In the same way, both authors are intent to showcase that this socially honored marital unions are in fact dismal failures, since both Hayat and Asya are trapped in frustrated and emotionally unfulfilled lives with their husbands. Indeed, both Hayat’s military spouse and Asya’s intellectual husband Saif prove epitomes of the Arab traditional man in his patriarchal egocentric mindset, working laboriously to prosper their careers while casting their wives (families) to the margin. Both heroines tend to be silenced by their husbands who encumber them from emerging as individuals in total possessions of themselves.

After five years of marriage and two years rupture of writing, Hayat recognizes the conformism that has cursed her life and bankrupted her femininity and creative spirit. She

comes to recognize the extent to which she has been upholding the social traditional role of an obedient concubine. The female narrator leads a loveless marriage with a budding disintegrated husband whose primary concern is to find an outlet to the country’s political and economic malaise. Further engulfed by the political events that plagued Algeria in the 1990s, the military husband becomes in total oblivion of his younger bride: “I’d also failed to possess [my husband], not because I was sharing him legally with another woman, but because he was possessed by responsibility, and since his only ‘cause’ was that of remaining in a position of power.” In this context, De Beauvoir asserts that “The tragedy of marriage is not that it fails to assure woman the promised happiness- there is no such thing as assurance in regard to happiness-but that it mutilates her; it dooms her to repetition and routine.”

Hayat suffers from lack of agency to fully communicate herself and desires, allowing her spouse to obliquely control her identity. She confesses, “It’s true also that I entered into slavery of my own free will, though probably without

noticing. I was content in my meek surrender to him, leaving to him the more enjoyable role: the role of manliness that commands, decides, demands, protects, pushes, and goes to extremes.” For her, her husband is an extension of the venerated paternal image that should never be questioned: “I noticed later that it was my husband’s fatherly role that meant the most to me. His political duties and military rank didn’t matter to me because of their prestige but, rather, because they were an extension of the patriotic nostalgia I’d been raised on, because they hearkened back to the glory days of an Algeria of which I’d always dreamed.” He thinks of her as a property to obtain and a victory to achieve, and she, as a good wife, has to forgive all the pains he inflicts: “Don’t women, like the peoples of the world, always fall prey to the charm and prestige of a military uniform before noticing that, by allowing themselves to be dazzled by it, they’ve given it its power?” Unconsciously, Hayat embarks on this sole conventionally legitimate status of a married woman. She depicts her joyless married relationship in military terms by assimilating her sexual relationship with her spouse to a military as-

sault where her husband is thrown on her to ensure a quick triumph. He is even against her fulfillment as a writer: “At one point he started expressing irritation at my sitting for long hours writing rather than spending my time on some child that never came. He couldn’t admit that what irritated him was the writing itself. He was annoyed by this act of confrontation and silent artifice whose credibility he couldn’t verify despite his advanced espionage capabilities.”

In her abusive conjugal bond that lacks love and care, Hayat’s increasing sense of self-alienation thrusts her to seek refuge in the fiction that would take concrete dimensions. The novelist eventually finds out that the inky ideal hero of her short story is a living creature who lodges in her real world. Indeed, the love-thirsty Hayat commits herself to search her femininity outside her married life “just because [her husband] was a man with no imagination or, rather, a man who exhausted all his imagination and intelligence somewhere other than in our bed.” To that end, she decides to find in the real world the protagonist of the story that she has just crafted: “I couldn’t understand how, in spite of all the

tragedies happening around me, he managed to go on living in me and keeping me from concentrating on anything but him.” Her quest symbolizes a cry of a married woman eager to repossess her womanhood, though in its sinful fashion when she comes to experience the crazy love and immense sexual pleasure she longs for in an adulterous affair with her hero. In this way, leaving the illusionary world of her stories for the real signalizes the inauguration of a new episode in Hayat’s life in which she culminates by reclaiming her femininity and intellectual writing ambitions: “Now that life had brought me this much enjoyment, I was afraid of the realization that before it, I’d been among the living dead.”

Unlike Hayat whose joyless marriage is purely traditional, Asya’s marriage to the charismatic Saif comes after a passionate romance that has inaugurated and lasted all throughout her undergraduate years at Cairo University. Saif, eight years her senior with a brilliant career, proves himself Asya’s ideal man. In an undeniable similar manner with Hayat’s state, the stumbling blocks Soueif’s protagonist Asya encounters during her difficult marriage thrust her

in the British Gerald Stone’s embrace. Though being married to her beloved intellectual man, Asya has to suffer Saif’s total ignorance of her emotional and sexual needs. A husband who unremittingly whines his wife’s rightful demands: “Your demands on my time and my emotions have become intolerable.” In this context, De Beauvoir maintains that man:

fails to realize that his wife is no character from some pious and conventional treatise, but a real individual of flesh and blood; he takes for granted her fidelity to the strict regimen she assumes, not taking into account that she has temptations to vanquish, that she may yield to them, that in any case her patience, her chastity, her propriety, are difficult conquests; he is still more profoundly ignorant of her dreams, her fancies, her nostalgic yearnings, of the emotional climate in which she spends her days.

Saif indulges in improving his work, travelling all the time totally oblivious of his wife’s growing loneliness. In addition to his indifference, Saif’s sexual frigidity and repulsive behaviors in bed do nothing than intensifying Asya’s

psychological crisis and conjugal alienation:

Could you? Please? Turn round and hold me?’ ‘Oh, sweetie, sweetie. Go to sleep.’ ‘ Please ? Just for a minute?’ And he would turn round, and big and solid and sweet-smelling, would hold her close for maybe five minutes, then he’d ask lightly, ‘Is that enough? Can I go to sleep now?’ And patting her hip or arm or whatever was nearest he would murmur, ‘ Good night, Princess,’ and he would turn over, and in minutes he would be a sleep. And she would lie awake and hold down the loneliness that threatened to turn into a full –blown panic.

Saif’s arrogant and cold attitudes towards Asya drive her to speak about her deep suffering asserting her own desire and resilience not to accept her state: “But you don’t care. You don’t care about me one bit as long as I don’t bug you. I could drop dead or take a lover or anything and you wouldn’t care.” All feelings of hopelessness and despair have led Asya to think of the significance of her married life. She realizes that she vainly waits for attention, emotional and sexual care from a husband who

turns his back on her every night, who speaks of looking forward to the day when, in the courtesy of advancing years, they will address each other as ‘Asya Hanim’ and ‘Saif Bey’ and take gentle strolls round the garden of the house he will build for them in the desert- and wait to die. And what about life? What about all the years that still has to pass? Emptiness. And then age, and then the only end of age .How will she bear it? What can she do?

Inescapably, the increasingly lonely and unfulfilled Asya indulges in a sexually gratifying relationship with the Englishman Gerald Stone. She resolves that she is in need of someone who actually wants her and needs to make love to her. Asya decides to fulfill her femininity with Gerald, to experience all that she lacks in her married life, “to feel hot breath on her face on her neck, and to feel a man’s hands on her breasts, on her waist, on her tummy...” In *The Female Eunuch*, Germaine Greer urges women leading unhappy marriages not to settle down but to embark on affairs, stressing the substance of not becoming dependent:

[W]omen ought not to enter into socially sanctioned relationships, like marriage, and that once unhappily in they ought not to scruple to run away. It might even be thought to suggest that women should be deliberately promiscuous. It certainly maintains that they should be self-sufficient and consciously refrain from establishing exclusive dependencies and other kinds of neurotic symbioses.

For Greer, women should take control of their sexuality rather than embracing the passive status imposed upon them by society. She explains, "What happens is that the female is considered as a sexual object for the use and appreciation of the other sexual beings, men. Her sexuality is both denied and misrepresented by being identified as passivity."

From that it follows, having embroiled their heroines in marital bonds is an astute narrative strategy deployed by the authors to criticize the patriarchal conception of the institution of marriage and accordingly to lay out their heroines' revolution against it. In this context, Greer argues that change has to come about via revolution not evolution: "The first exercise

of the free woman is to devise her own mode of revolt, a mode which will reflect her own independence and originality. The more clearly the forms of oppression emerge in her understanding, the more clearly she can see the shape of future action." According to the theorist, once a woman has a good grasp of the oppressive societal forces that unceasingly silence her, she is able to devise her own mode of revolt which can free her and enlighten her future path. Both heroines appear to experience a gradual loss of their identities, becoming increasingly self-alienated in their marriages. Nevertheless, they manage to invent their own modes of revolt, intentionally or unintentionally, incarnated in their extramarital affairs, writing fiction, pursuing a PhD degree and divorce, and which do help getting them out of their trapped situations. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan argues that in order to regain their subjectivity, women need to move away from the nuclear family model and its expectations. Only then could they lead more fulfilling lives in which they would not have to play the roles of objects while men are the subjects, or endure "The Problem That Has No Name." Both authors decons-

tract the concepts of marriage and the devout wife by creating unhappy and unfaithful married heroines who seek to reclaim their womanhood via adulterous relationships. In presenting marriage as a bleak burial of their heroines' femininity and personality, the novelists raise doubts about the inevitability of this social institution as an indispensable and happy fate for Arab women.

2. Deconstructing Maternity and the Image of the Traditional Mother:

Women's role as biological and cultural procreators is mostly valorized in patriarchal Arab societies where womanhood is often equated to motherhood. In this respect, Ketu Katrak points out that one parameter about patriarchal control is by way of rendering female sexuality mystified and obscuring it into motherhood: "The sexual dimensions of a female role such as that of a wife are mystified often into a purely social dimension because doing so suits a patriarchal authority that under the guise of protection controls and defines female sexuality." Through their heroines Hayat and Asya, both Mosteghanemi and Soueif contest

the patriarchal conception of an idealized motherhood as a social construction which denies women's femininity and cultural productivity. They create female protagonists who advertently reject the assigned role of the traditional sacrificial mother.

Isam Shihada argues that not only does Asya's father object his daughter's desire to marry her beloved fiancé before finishing college, but also "Her decision to marry Saif at the age of eighteen is ... challenged by her mother, Lateefa Mursi, who is supposed to have more faith in her daughter's decisions rather than playing a conformist role." In the following passage, Asya expresses her frustration towards her mother's conformism in pursuing her father's will to postpone her wedding and feels herself more judicious than her:

But you can't make such an important decision just like that. You can't determine the rest of your life suddenly one night when you are not yet eighteen. And I felt suddenly and for the first time in my life that I was wiser and stronger than she was, and I kissed her and said, 'Don't worry, Mummy. I

know what I am doing.

As a matter of fact, Asya has a robust relationship with her mother, who proves herself less suffocating than other traditional Arab mothers who blindly uphold and exercise the patriarchal repressive rules upon their daughters. Though enraged at her daughter's extramarital affair with the British Gerald, Asya's mother could but yield her moral support to her beloved daughter. This however does not deny the fact that Asya views her mother as a woman who in spite of her intellectual blooming stance as the first Egyptian head of the department of English in Cairo University, does nothing than recycling the traditional maternal role. Once in the confines of her private realm, Professor Lateefa Mursi performs the role of the submissive powerless wife whose utmost goal is to maintain peace and stability while confronting the authoritative patriarch in the household. Asya explodes when her mother suggests that she should go back home to her husband after a fight they have had. Asya responds:

'Yes, that's always been your policy: minimise, appease, avoid confrontation, peace at any price -

why shouldn't homes be ruined if they're ripe for ruining?... It's as if nothing matters but a peaceful life. Even though it's only outwardly peaceful, mind you. You've never stood up to Daddy. Not once. We are supposed to believe you had this wonderfully happy marriage, but it was all at your expense. '

Asya definitely has no will to become a duplicate of her mother, the subservient wife and the sacrificial mother. Indeed, her willingness to be out of conventionality and traditionalism is mostly incarnated in her indifference at the news of her unexpected pregnancy. Unlike Saif who feels exulted at his wife's pregnancy, Asya seems not so much impassioned to have a baby. She expresses disbelief "Thirteen months married and four months pregnant. But how could it have happened?" Her reaction reflects her reluctance to have a child and perform the roles of the happy wife and the flawless mother. However, her rejection of motherhood is disputed by her patriarchal milieu which deeply exalts the maternal role of the married woman. A case in point is the conversation between Asya and two traditional mothers, Tante Soraya and Dada Sayyida:

You've always been clever and sweet," Tante Soraya said, and now you will give us a beautiful clever sweet little girl just like you and she will be the first grandchild in the family just as you were the first child." Asya had shrugged. Asya had known there was no more to be said. Dada Sayyida filled the little silence. "Children are the ornament of life," truly it was said. Dada Sayyida had seven children, two of them blind. Tante Sorya glanced at Asya's face „ Smooth it out now and stop frowning. This is the greatest gift God can give a human being, and you receive it like this?

As the pregnancy comes against Asya's will, the fetus never sees the light of the day since the heroine soon undergoes miscarriage.

By a similar token, Hayat resolves that she is unwilling to carry out the assigned maternal role of her mother. She "will not repeat in her life the oppression that her mother and grandmother suffered," to be the selfless mother whose goal in life is to reproduce the traditional education to the coming generation. According to Ellen Mclarney, "a woman cannot find refuge in the structures of social legitima-

cy forever, in the roles of mother, daughter, and unattainable lover. To truly express herself, she must open up, give of herself, exposing herself to the public." Asya's mother, a widow of a martyr as soon her twenty-three years, takes refuge in religion and in the perpetuation of traditions. She lives alone in her apartment awaiting vainly the return of her son Nasser, disappeared presumably in the fundamentalists' ranks. Throughout the narration, Hayat unveils the details of her mother's conventional education, the scene the most revealing being that of the Turkish steam bath.

Hayat describes the steam room as the trap of femininity: "This is a place where you learn from the glances of others how to deny your body, persecute your desires and wash your hands of your femininity. People here teach you that not only is sex shameful, but so too femininity, along with everything that bespeaks it." She denounces the women's obsession with cleanliness and views it as a kind of purifying themselves of their femininity. Hayat on the contrary, does not see in her femininity a problem to get rid of:

was womanhood a kind of ritual impurity ? Or did these women, most of whom went through their entire lives without ever denuding themselves in front of a man, have some sort of libidinous relationship with these huge quantities of water, which they poured over their bodies pail after pail for hours on end with a mysterious sort of enjoyment, and an utter preoccupation with the womanly aspects of their physical selves?

She attempts to protect her nudity and refuses to undress completely under the pressure of her mother who wills her daughter's body to be disclosed in their exclusive territory. This act from the part of her mother is symbolic by which the mother, protective of traditions, imposes a rite on her daughter. Hayat explains how her mother belongs to this environment and feels comfortable in it: "I could understand her logic. The bath was the place where she could meet all the women in the city. Like them, she could gossip freely, talk about whatever was new in her life, and show off her new purchases, her jewellery, and the clothes that no man had ever seen."

unwilling to have children. Indeed, she never reacts to her mother's nuisances urging her to seek remedy for her five years marital barrenness. The mother even goes onto suspecting her daughter's co-wife to be accountable of Hayat's sterile state. Yet, Hayat never responds to the logic of her mother's assumptions: "[my mother] was convinced that my co-wife was the cause of my infertility as well as some other things that had happened to me, though I myself didn't believe it." She appears disinterested in figuring out the causes behind her infertility, which lays bare her reluctance to take up the traditional maternal role:

[My husband] began sending me from doctor to doctor and city to city, hoping to turn motherhood into my first concern. I lost count of all the doctors I went to with special recommendations, and all the shrines my mother made me visit for this or that saint's blessing. For two years she and I made the rounds of Algeria's shrines even though I wasn't convinced of the value of what we were doing and didn't even want to be 'cured' of my barrenness.

Like Asya, Hayat appears

By highlighting her heroine's

infertility and disinterestedness to have children, Mosteghanemi devalues the concept of motherhood and therefore the role of mothers as bastions and guardians of tradition. Katrak contends that after the period of decolonization, women were reconstructed in nationalist discourse primarily as symbols and protectors of traditional culture. She claims that the conviction that women were the guardians of tradition, especially during times of anti-colonial struggle, was used to further buttress these traditions even within the most regressive forms. She adds this leads to even more subjugation for women since the key issue tradition plays is the control of female sexuality which is legitimized, and even mystified, under the name of tradition.

During the Algerian liberation struggle, the family and home were conceived as a bastion of an idealized vision of pre-colonial Arabo-Islamic values which women should keep and protect. The official national rhetoric throughout the colonial period was that women should resist first and foremost from their position within the household by guarding Algerian traditionalism, which was conceptualized as a stronghold of Algerian

identity that was impenetrable by the colonizer's culture. In women, Islam and the State, Deniz Kandiyoti argues that, by preserving the authenticity of the family and the woman, Arab states committed to the preservation of an idealized and authentic Islamic society.

In addition to the image of her mother, Hayat describes two other conformist figures that she wants to depart from, that of her sister-in-law and that of her husband's first wife. For her, those two women are an epitome of the traditional Arab woman whose self expression and will are robbed under the control of the patriarch. They perfectly represent the image of the subservient silent Arab wife who is confined in domesticity and doomed to passivity. Hayat's sister-in-law Farida conforms blindly to the patriarchal system without questioning its prejudices. For her "freedom consisted of nothing more than her right to dream" while Hayat has "become a free woman precisely because I'd decided to stop dreaming!" After her divorce, Farida admits to live with her brother to serve his wives. She even accepts the infidelity of her brother to his wives since she considers it as his right as a man,

mainly a man of state. As regards the first woman, Hayat describes her as a being stripped of her will. After twenty years of marriage and three children, she can do nothing to stop her husband's second marriage: "I couldn't stop thinking back to her silent presence at the wedding party out of consideration for my husband, who had wanted to prove to everyone that he was marrying me with her blessing." De Beauvoir argues that women have taken part in othering themselves as the "second" inferior sex by accepting this patriarchal categorization. She explores the otherness of women, their lack of subjectivity and suggests that the reason these women never rose up against their oppressors was due to the entangled personal relations they have with them in the house. She asks:

Why is it that women do not dispute male sovereignty? No subject will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential; it is not the Other who, in defining himself as the Other, establishes the One. The Other is posed as such by the One in defining himself as the One. But if the Other is not to regain the status of being the One, he must be submissive enough to accept

this alien point of view. Whence comes this submission in the case of woman?

Indeed, both De Beauvoir and Friedan charge women for allowing the prejudiced patriarchal system to persist. Hayat considers Farida and her co-wife accomplices in the crime of male oppression. Their mothers, as cultural reproducers, have educated them to obey and please the men and have assigned to their husbands and sons absolute rights. Farida and the first woman seem to insist on their marginalization through their silent approval of the oppressive phallogocentric system. Cheryl Rubenberg argues that "it is women who teach girls the rightness or the truth of their traditionally defined roles, responsibilities, relations, and restrictions. Mothers provide their daughters with things that are haram, eib, and mamnoua."

In addition to their purposeful destabilization of the image of the silent dutiful wife (both protagonists seem discontent to resume the traditional assigned wifely role that expects married women to be the faithful wives by experiencing their femininity through extramarital affairs), both Mosteghanemi

and Soueif dismantle the concept of motherhood inherent in the preeminent masculine national discourse which equates womanhood with motherhood and which venerates the role of the married woman as a mother with numerous children. Through their depiction of their protagonists' abortive wedlock and childlessness but prosperous intellectual careers and public agency, the authors devalue the traditional idealized social institutions of marriage and maternity assigned to women and that stand for domesticity and passivity.

3. Cultural Producers not Reproducers:

In fact, both authors seem to empower their heroines not solely through voicing their womanhood but also through their intellects. Their intent is not only revolved around their heroines' fulfillment of their feminine desires but also intellectual and professional aspirations which grant them access to the male public domain. In this light, they are concerned with showcasing the vital role their educational and academic careers contribute to their eventual personal growth and agency in the process of making their postcolonial

national communities.

Hayat's fictional writing enables her to explore her turbulent and chaotic emotions, and therefore to grasp the source of her marital problem as well as her mistake of conventionality which contradicts her education and intellect. She does not realize that "the writing process in which I'd sought refuge from life would take me, albeit obliquely, back towards life itself, thrusting me into a story that would, one page after another, become my own." It therefore yields her the power to transgress all moral and cultural boundaries and to sorely speak out her lust and make incest out of conjugal bed, she asks, "Had my literary curiosity led me into this bizarre adventure? Or was I running after love on a literary pretext?" Indeed, Mosteghanemi is intent to demonstrate how writing enables Hayat to assert herself not only as a writer but also as a loving and desirable woman. The narrator admits: "Writing is always scary, because it makes an appointment for us with all the things we're afraid to face or understand too deeply."

Hayat's fictional world does not merely grant her a space to escape her painful reality in a loveless

marriage but also is the catalyst that makes of her a rebel against the stifling patriarchal mores of her society. The world where the “impossible love relationship that might join a man of ink with a woman of paper, who meet in the hazy realm between writing and life and set about together to write a book that both emerges from life and rebels against it.” Writing then becomes a space of emancipation and equality which grants Hayat an equal stance to man as Nuha Baaqeel aptly asserts: “The flourishing career of Hayat as a writer demonstrates her journey along a path from patriarchal oppression [her military husband who neglects her just as her father did in the past] towards a feminist conception of equality and freedom.”

Just as Hayat whose writing is the momentum that empowers her to overthrow her trapped situation and mature into a more sophisticated woman; so too does Asya’s decision to obtain a PhD in England consist the first step towards her independence and disentanglement from her matrimonial bond. When interrogated why she bothers to do the PhD when it signifies she will be separated from her husband, she

clarifies, “I don’t think I could live without doing something that’s mine.” Inevitably, in addition to her extra-marital affair and inescapable divorce, holding a doctorate degree is another mode of revolt. Soueif’s heroine has developed to reclaim her individuality and self-identity. Asya in her creator’s words is “a woman who is able to draw her own destiny and move forward to serve her community positively without the suffocating restraints of a frustrating and hopeless marriage.”

Asya resolutely returns to her home country with her PhD in complete possession of herself, throwing behind both her husband and British lover. On those grounds, Asya’s self-awareness that she needs to fulfill her personal autonomy and lead life of her own enables her to escape the pitfalls of silence, submission and passivity that many intellectual Arab women fall prey to. In so doing, she deconstructs the conventional view that a woman is unable to live in society without men and that women’s very existence is at once conditioned by and defined in relation to men. The Algerian scholar Fouad Mami claims that “Asya at the end looks fulfilled as

she feels she is contributing to her nation with vocational teaching. Instead of surrender to despair, she is hopeful as she is socially proactive and part of the remedy that she has always wanted to take place.” Indeed, Asya gets herself involved in community activities as a teacher of English literature at the American university in Cairo, as well as “to work in a program offering help to the Egyptian village women. A step courageously taken by her in spite of the domestic pressures in a patriarchal Arab society where marriage is seen as a fundamental foundation of society and where divorced or separated women are looked upon with little respect.” According to El Saadawi, “the great majority of Arab women ...are still terrorized by the mere word ‘divorce’ which means hunger, no home, and the unrelenting remarks of those around them.”

Conclusion:

Both Mosteghanemi and Soueif create female protagonists who might experience themselves as victims of societal androcentric institutions maintained in the Arab world at the beginning of the plots but they rebel against them and create self-fulfilling identities.

The novelists are intent to air their thoughts by criticizing and dismantling the social institutions of wifehood and motherhood performed in the household and by unleashing their heroines’ femininity and intellectual productivity within their patriarchal oppressive societies that shove them as subservient silent creatures. The authors underscore their heroines’ questioning of traditional stereotyping of women’s roles whilst negotiating their own modes of subversion towards self-discovery. Hayat and Asya resist the institutions of marriage and maternity by developing their own modes of revolt. Whether by resorting to the art of writing fiction, pursuing postgraduate studies, extramarital affairs or divorce, both heroines appear determined of no longer succumbing to the moral and social pressures exerted upon them. By the end of the stories, the heroines come to recognize that finding and freeing oneself from a patriarchal system is an ongoing process. Asya is able to free herself through divorce becoming more mature and intellectually productive in her community; while Hayat- though still married- the ending of the novel hints unequivocally that the narrator will soon repeat the forbidden

love of the story which may lead to an eventual end of her marriage. At the close of the book, the text alludes that Hayat will buy a new notebook and thus she would begin writing a new story that would again throw her in the ocean of sinful love and to a potential emancipation from her marital bond. In their feminist counter-narrative discourses, those female authors contend that Arab woman's function in her national community should transcend the symbolic and private terrains; she should be an active subject sharing equal rights and responsibilities with her male counterpart in building the nation.

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