Mobility And 'Multiple Jeopardy' In *Love In The Kingdom of Oil*

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Abstract

The study of Arab Muslim women's mobility provokes interest in the stereotypes of Islamic society being patriarchal and spatially segregated along gender lines. This paper argues that pressures on Arab Muslim women's socio-economic mobility prospects cannot only be traced to patriarchy and spatial segregation as their domination and subordination occurs on a multiplicity of scales. The article therefore traces the intertwined relationship and power imbalances between global, national and domestic spheres and the conglomerate impact of all these on the socio-economic mobility of Egyptian Muslim women as depicted in Nawal El Saadawi's Love in the Kingdom of Oil. To study this, I draw upon Deborah King's 'multiple jeopardy', Fatima Mernissi's 'pyramidal model of hierarchy' and Valentine Moghadam's 'structural determinants' to explore the pressures on female socio-economic mobility. The article examines issues such as the overexploitation and increasing vulnerability of Muslim women both at work and home under the impact of global corporate forces, the impact of non-democratic policies on the common masses in the postcolonial nation state and the increasing resistance to female mobility in the different social milieus, the patriarchal forces within the institutional structures using Islam to control women and restricting them from socio-economic mobility, and the odds of breaking loose from this pyramid of hierarchy.

Keywords: *socio-economic mobility, woman researcher, pyramid of hierarchy, structural determinants, domestic realm*

1. Theoretical Framework

The relegation of women to the domain of domesticity has often been viewed as a strong argument against Arab Muslim women's mobility. This paper argues that Arab Muslim women's socio-economic mobility instead has to be seen in a broader context where they suffer not only from patriarchal domination at home but also,like their male counterparts, the imperialist domination of western powers. To properly encapsulate the extent of forces operative in determining female mobility in the Arab world, I draw upon Fatima Mernissi's pyramidal model of hierarchy which is also central to Nawal el Saadawi's oeuvre. According to this model, international, national and domestic spheres are interlinked such that authority flows from top to bottom. The domestic level, fraught with highly precarious male-female dynamics, actually serves as the linchpin to keep the entire pyramid intact. In this the man is "an obedient submitter, in the public realm, to God and his earthly surrogates, who are all males, *and* a master to whom submission is made, in the private realm, where men master women"(Mernissi, 1996,p.119). Ironically the entire hierarchy survives if women keep to their proper sphere. Unfortunately the whole burden then falls upon men who must censure women's trespassing to avoid failure in fulfilling the cultural expectations of *qawwamun*(protectors and maintainers) especially when unemployment and inflation is on the rise. Interestingly for all "matrices of power, inequalities, and complicities with global neoliberal power within the postcolonial sovereign national state" (Mignolo cited in Jabri, 2013,p.19), the all-too easy panacea is the domestic realm where women become an easy target. With this in view, I argue that Arab Muslim women's mobility prospects, under the three interdependent control systems discussed above, call for a study of 'multiple jeopardy' where "several,

simultaneous oppressions" as well as the "multiplicative relationships between them" (King,1988, p. 47) require serious attention. To systematically study this area with reference to Nawal el Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* (2001), I follow Valentine 'structural determinants ' (M. Moghadam's 2003, p.2) to show how multiple and endless pressures bear upon the prospects and nature of Arab Muslim women's mobility.

2. Introduction

Love in the Kingdom of Oil presents female mobility as highly precarious. In the very beginning, it is told a "Woman [researcher] goes on leave and does not return" (p. 5). This is presente as a matter of great concern because there is no precedent of a woman going on leave and not returning. The police search for her and adverts and leaflets are distributed along with an announcement of a reward from the Majesty for anyone finding her dead or alive. The active mobilization of all the state machinery in finding the woman along with the personal interest the Majesty shows proves that her mobility poses a threat to the 'established order'. This is further foregrounded through the police commissioner's interrogation of the woman's boss: "Was she one of those women who are troublemakers and rebels against the established order?" (p.7). This apprehension gets further confirmed when the royal decree is issued the following day, forbidding women to take leave; and if a woman goes after all, it is forbidden to give her shelter or to conceal her (p.10). In the novel, far more than the husband and the boss, it is the Majesty and his repressive and ideological state apparatuses which are obsessed with this issue. This could not get a more thorough diagnosis than who believes that political leaders are irate with female mobility(carried out in defiance of all traditional restrictions in terms of their proper sphere) because "if domestic *ta'a* is challenged by weak women, how can men be expected to lower their eyes in deference to the leader?"(Mernissi 2002, p. 153).The obsession with ensuring domestic *ta'a* (obedience) is tenacious as the anonymous global forces that control and decide the economies of nations increasingly jeopardize the role of a Muslim male as a sole breadwinner. Under these circumstances, as Rosemary Radford Ruether says, "control over women seems to become the place where men can imagine that they are reclaiming order against chaos, their dignity, honor, and security in a world where there is little on the macro level" (2002, p.4).

3. Analyses & Discussion

Female mobility is feared for undermining domestic *ta'a*. However, this does not mean that travelling is absolutely forbidden to all Muslim women of whatever class just as it is not absolutely accessible to all Muslim men either. In this regard, I agree with Janet Wolff that apart from gender, there are "disparities of wealth and cultural capital, and class difference generally, [which] have always ensured real disparities in access to and modes of travel" (Wolff, J., 1993, p.224). *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* underscores the different constitution of the (female) gender in relation to social class, age, literacy and other socio-economic and cultural variables. The nature and degree of female seclusion, mobility and autonomy within the same Muslim society and in different social classes also changes over time. Moghadam argues that "today upper-class women have more mobility than lower-class women, although in the past it was the reverse: veiling and seclusion were upper-class phenomenon" (Moghadam, 2003, p.6). Mernissi, however, views their mobility as more perilous compared to that of poor women on account of potential impact it has in subverting oppressive authorities. In the novel, the woman researcher takes leave and sets off in search of the hidden goddesses, but then she is incapacitated due to taboos associated with being an unchaperoned woman. On the other hand, the illiterate village women commute daily though under severe exploitative conditions. The only educated woman from poor parents in the valley could not run away from the constricting life options as the newspapers had published her picture and the people " brought her back before she had gone beyond the

fixed boundaries of religion" (p.82). Mernissi therefore says "the enemy to be fought is not the female proletariat" but "middle-class women who have had access to education and valorizing salaried jobs" (2002, p. 158). In the novel, the threat does not come from the mobility of the village women, who are uneducated, veil their faces, wear the traditional dress, combine their domestic work with waged work, and who neither claim the right to use their wages as they wish nor harbour any ambition of a different life. The threat is from the woman researcher who is unveiled, has her identity card (p. 17), desires to expose the fraud of tampering with the statues of female goddesses (pp. 68, 94), demands her wages, urges the village women to show solidarity and demand their rights (p.90), and even incites the man to rise up to the twin exploitation by the Majesty and the president of the oil refinery (p. 44). Threat or no threat, women's socio-economic mobility subjects them to innumerable pressures due to multiple forces. Therefore to study the roots of resistance to female mobility I draw upon Moghadam's (2003) 'structural determinants,' such as "the sex/gender system, class, and economic development and state policies that operate within the capitalist world system" (p. 14). To this end, I study first the asymmetries due to a world system of states and markets and then the state policies under their impact or due mainly to failed indigenous plans for female integration. I finally delve into the domestic scenario where while things get far complicated, the actors become fewer: man versus woman.

The people in the 'Kingdom of Oil' live under appalling circumstances despite the abundance of oil in their country. They slave away their lives working for the oil refinery owned by a foreign company. Oil companies, says Noami Klein, have "a long and uninterrupted history of collaborating with repressive governments to extract valuable resources with little concern for the people who live near them" (Noami Klein 2001, p.332). This is obvious in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*. The Majesty is flanked by the owner of the foreign oil company in the celebration parade. The local villagers enjoy no benefits from the oil rich area they live in. Instead they live in slums where the streets are narrow, mud houses are all huddled together, garbage is littered on the roofs, the smell of the gases rises from the wide-mouthed wells, even oil vapours flow in the air and clog nostrils and ears and cling to the body parts and dead dogs lie on the dirt floor (p. 12). The people lack the basic amenities of life, for example, electricity and clean water. These hazardous living conditions may lead to skin and respiratory diseases and one obvious result of oil extraction processes is the dire shortage of water that the natives of the village are already experiencing. It is quite obvious that the government of the Kingdom of Oil has placed no checks and balances on the foreign companies to safe-guard the health and rights of local workers as well as to protect national reserves. It is thus that important questions related to the origin and nature of the company, the partners and the clients as well as the wages it gives are left unexplained. The economic mobility of all workers, and especially women in the Kingdom of Oil is carried out under, what Castell termed, conditions of 'over-exploitation' indicating working arrangements that "allowed capital to systematically withhold payment/resource allocation, or impose harsher working conditions, on certain types of workers, below what is the norm/regulation in a given formal labor" (Castell, 2010, 71). I read this as creating, what Hartsock calls, feminization of the labor force-a term referring to anyone especially women trapped in low-end jobs and "reduced to powerlessness, invisibility, and super-exploitation" (Nagar et al., 2000, p. 263).In this novel, the wages for the women's arduous work are meagre and paid to the male members. Despite playing a crucial role in the domestic and national economy, the women are constantly reminded that their labour is expendable as technologically advanced robots powered by oil can also carry jars to the oil refinery (p. 98). This is used to prevent women from claiming their wages and better treatment at home and work place. The exploitation of women workers is severe given that, and as Mernissi thoughtfully articulates, their wage work is not even considered legitimate in the presence of the traditional model where the division of labour reserves women to the domestic realm. This "enables whoever uses female labour to

pay a lower price for it, so that female labour is the cheapest and most easily exploitable form of labour in our countries"(1996, p. 73-74).

Prospects of female economic integration in the Kingdom of Oil in Egypt, like many other postcolonial countries in the Arab region and elsewhere, suffer as the Majesty seems to have submitted to the pressures of capitalist countries in return for self-enrichment. Ignoring economic development and restructuring of the local economic base of his country, the Majesty has adopted policies that have created "non-democratic, non -accountable and non-transparent institutions at the heart of economy" (Legum, 1999, P. 44). Nobody can question him over donating three million dollars to a zoo in the north while paying a deaf ear to alarming news of death due to extreme poverty and hunger, such as the three women who die in a queue outside a bakery or a mother who slaughtered her three children and later herself on Mothers' Day. In a kingdom where hunger, deprivation and misery are on the rise, the Majesty enjoys extravagant birthday celebrations but forbids the distribution of sweets on Children's Day. Extreme aggression against women goes unchecked: a woman can be killed for walking in the street with her face uncovered, eight men can rape a little girl in school but no news item reveals what happens to the offenders. Given the economic and physical exploitation of the woman researcher who dared to trespass for a greater aim in her life, finding female goddesses, it seems unlikely whether the offenders of such crimes are actually considered responsible or whether such crimes incur capital punishment, especially as the Kingdom had only heard of men's rights and there was not anything resembling women's rights (p.39).

Despite the abundance of oil, the people fail to use the oil resources for their own advantage due to the absence of democracy which benefits the western powers that thrive on the oil wealth (Mernissi, 2002, p. 167). While the citizens lead a life of misery and destitution, the politicians , for example, the Oil Minister, can benefit from what Bayart (1996) calls 'the politics of the belly' by receiving "a bribe larger than the defence budget" (p. 65). The oil reserves have proven merely to be a "resource curse" (Ross 2001; Harford and Klein 2005) due to malpractices of the national elites and failure in developing indigenous plans and utilizing the local resources in a pure democratic setup. This regime seems to have surrendered to the neoliberal measures enforced on the developing economies requiring foreign aid. The austerity measures required on the part of the governments are applied unfairly: the Majesty spends lavishly on his birthday celebrations but provides no subsidy on basic food items, nor raises the minimum wages to help the public survive under high inflation. Instead of privatizing other public service related institutions the Foreign Ministry, so central to securing a country's international relations, is put on auction. With endless problems at home and tensed relations with the neighbouring countries, the Majesty declares war against 'Satan', a war fought over oil reserves in which, according to this novel, "Half a million [were] killed in oil war" (p.65). The absence of real democracy and social service programmes together with spending the highest percentage of the gross domestic product on buying arms and ammunition from the superpowers exacerbates problems such as poverty and unemployment. All this tremendously diminishes chances of female integration in the national economy. It is no wonder that Mernissi argues "How can Arab women hope to overcome opposition in their societies and go out in search of paid work if the economies of their countries are devoting a large part of their wealth to unproductive expenditures?"(2002, p. 169). The Gulf War and the consequent complications in the existing pressures on female mobility have been central, as Saadawi professes, in the genesis of *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*. I would consolidate my preceding discussion with her very lucid pyramidal analyses of the pressures on female mobility:

> *Oil was the reason for the Gulf War. Oil has been the reason for the continuing colonial aggression against us in the Arab world for the past half-century. Arab rulers, including the Gulf kings and princes, collaborated with the neocolonizers. Millions of women and men in our region suffer poverty, ignorance and disease. My novel Love in the Kingdom of Oil is about the suffering. And it describes what happens when its heroine tries to escape her oppression- in all its forms. (1997, p. 7-8)*

The woman researcher's efforts to escape her oppression end in a more vicious web of multiplicative oppression. Limiting my discussion to the mobility trope, I follow Janet Wolff's argument that the gendering of travel as male 'both impedes female travel and renders problematic the self-definition of (and response to) women who *do* travel" (1993, p. 234), thus mobility does not help the woman researcher to escape oppression. It was thus that the woman researcher was sexually and physically exploited by the man who gave her shelter and the village men also did not object to it as they seem to believe the woman has "'asked for it' as [she has] singularly 'exposed' [herself] by turning away from the Father's refuge" (Min-ha, 1998, p. 15). Once in the valley of oil, she fails to amass means to return. She struggles to carry twice or thrice the number of jars to earn herself a return ticket (p. 102), she even demands her wages urging "all [she] want[s] is a return ticket"(p. 89) and is browbeaten when she becomes subject to multiple and multiplicative pressures when the man forces numerous restrictions on her. He tries to dominate her through thirst and insists that if she wanted few drops of water , she must not hatch up "that plot"(of running away), must forget her ideals of female goddesses and all women (feminism) and must understand that her every move and every emotion is under strict surveillance (pp. 83-84). Compared to the other women workers who harbour no rebellious spirits, the movements of the woman researcher are monitored closely (pp.102-103). The woman researcher is greatly depressed when she eavesdrops on the interrogation from her husband and boss in one of the highly surrealist passages where boundaries blur between details regarding her past and present life. She develops acute consciousness of having swapped one set of oppressive conditions with others in leaving her job and travelling to the small village and realizes that in case of her return home, the situation is unlikely to improve. This makes further excursion a frightening nightmare for her: "She remained standing where she was. She wrapped her arms….her eyes darted to and fro. She moved forward a step and then back a step. Like a rat standing in front of a hole in the wall not knowing if it is a bolt hole or the mouth of a trap" (p. 85). This anxiety accompanies any woman daring to trespass the boundaries. A married woman's mobility becomes an unthinkable move especially if undertaken without her husband's permission. To dare to move away without his consent or against his will means requiring a place of refuge that cannot be provided by just any man as she must seek refuge only with a person she is legally wedded to:

> *It had not occurred to him even in a dream that he could lose her. It was not permitted for a woman to be lost. She had no other place to lose herself in, and if there was another place, there was not another man, and if there was another man, there was no piece of paper. And a woman had no existence without a piece of paper. (p. 95)*

Female mobility is therefore highly precarious in the absence of an accompanying male guardian or when not carried out with his permission. In the Valley of Oil, the woman researcher's mobility prospects were greatly impacted due to the job priorities of the man who gave her shelter. She wanted to leave the place but could not as the man did not want to leave it for fear of losing his job to "a long queue of people wanting impatiently for [his] place to fall vacant" (p. 40**).** He rather forced her to stay at the place, doing menial work of carrying oil jars to the factory instead of returning to the place where

she worked as an archaeologist. Her current status shows that in the absence of ample and well-paid jobs enabling men to earn a family wage, women are forced by the circumstances to quit the sanctity of their homes and accept highly exploitative jobs. Building upon Michael Ross's (2008) idea, I argue that when a woman's 'unearned income' is less on account of her husband's low paid job, she has less 'reservation wage' and thereby the desirability to stick to the domestic role declines (p. 3). I, however, look at Ross's postulate of 'unearned income' and 'reservation wage' from another perspective, that is, where a man receives 'unearned income' from a woman's labour in order to increase his 'reservation wage' required mainly to perform his role of breadwinner. Under this arrangement, female mobility is forced upon them by the patriarchs while the dividends earned thereby are systematically withheld in the name of patriarchal authority. The impetus is to make women bring pin money for assisting men in performing their role of breadwinner and maintaining their status of *qiwammah* (maintainers and providers). This is not all. Women undergo severe control when men fail to fulfill, as Sarah Graham-Brown says, their side of the 'patriarchal bargains' by providing economically for the family. Hence owing to the gap between what men get and what they believe they should get, which Ted Robert Gurr labels as "relative deprivation," the prospects of men turning to violence (qtd. in Nassar, 2010, p.15) against women increases. In this case a man's response "may be to assert lost authority through other means- physical violence, greater monitoring of women's behaviour and dress, confining them to the home, or responding negatively to their demands for education and employment"(Sarah Graham-Brown , 2001, p. 6).

For all such aggression against women, patriarchal interpretations of religious injunctions provide irrefutable support to the male patriarchs. The woman researcher has to bear with the exclusive right to the divine blessings that men claim by projecting, as Asma Barlas says , "a sexual identity and sexual bias onto God by claiming that God "himself" is partial to men who have a special affinity with God" (2004, p.8). This is the reason that men in the Kingdom of Oil proudly claim "Don't you see that God is always with us (p. 98)?" This culture of misogyny is so deeply entrenched that women even fear questioning the cultural assumptions and values that masquerade as religious for fear of persecution. The woman researcher is made speechless and confused, when in response to her request for the wages of her labour, the man retains them due not from him but God. To quell her questioning of his weak logic, he links her insistence to lack of faith in God:

> 'Who pays my wage?
> Your wage is due from God
> 'God? What are you saying, man?'
> Don't you believe God exists, woman?'

His voice had become angry and the tone threatening. She was demanding her wage and he was demanding that she have faith.

She did not know, but the situation had been reversed. He had become the person in the right, and she no longer had any request to make. He had put her in the dock and had begun to circle around her ruffling his hair and roaring like a lion. (p. 80)

The moral and religious authority the man was enforcing on the dumbfounded woman had altogether a different motive: the desire that she should submit unquestioningly to his authority and keep working for him. Instead of Islam, as Michael Ross says in "Oil, Islam and Women" (2008), it is the oil wealth which is responsible for the persistence of patriarchy and women's low participation or participation in

highly exploitable working arrangements. Mernissi links the persistence of patriarchy to the wastage of oil money on useless expenditures: on buying arms and ammunition as pointed earlier, and in inculcating *ta'a*(obedience to authority). She says "Oil money is not being invested to redress the inequalities of access to knowledge, but rather under the cloak of the sacred to cultivate *ta'a*(obedience to authority) and the docility and proverbial fatalism that are continually dinned into our ear" (2002, p.81). Had it not been for this, the man would not have found fault only in the woman's insistence for the wages. Despite having acute realization of his exploitation under the global corporate forces and the national ruler and knowing clearly that "After celebrating the Festival, little people like ourselves will be forgotten and the great will seize our portion" (p. 84), he shows absolute fatalism while telling her "All we ask for is mercy. We all know that the only person who benefits from the oil is the owner of the company, and His Majesty of course. That's logical. What's wrong with that? It's their right, by order of heaven. Do you never stop being greedy?" (p. 90). In the consciousness of general male residents of the Valley, even the issue of insane rise in prices is deflected from its real causes to the "latest heresy", that is, women's demand for wages (P. 98). Such irrational thinking makes men view women workers and family members more as rivals and less as partners in the struggle of life pitted against common 'structural determinants'. This merely benefits the national elites and international capitalist forces on the top of the pyramid at the expense of lower classes.

4. Conclusion

In short, the mobility prospects of Arab Muslim women appear inextricably linked to the national and cultural forces which are oppressive for men too. The woman researcher believes that the prospects of female mobility can be ensured by developing shared bonds with women and men as both are being impacted by the multiplicative effects of the 'structural determinants'. Mernissi refers to this reality when she writes "Surprisingly enough, the serious blows to male supremacy did not come from women, who have been reduced to helplessness by their historical situation, but from the state" (1985, p.172). The woman researcher asks the women in the Valley of Oil to develop solidarity if they want to escape being buried in the lake of oil and stay thus until the Day of Resurrection (p.75). Facing a similar predicament, she also exhorts the man that "[t]here must be solidarity so that *we* can become powerful" (p. 90). Through solidarity, women alone can plan an effective counteraction as in the text where they were imagined as "kicking the ground with their feet and the picture of His Majesty was shaking at the top of the pillar, then it fell under their feet and they trampled on it"(p. 48). Together men and women would be more forceful in exerting pressure against the oppressive structures and claiming effective integration in the national and international economy. With 'multiple jeopardy' affecting both the sexes at home and work addressed, female socio-economic mobility I believe will get more approval.

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