

**Addis Ababa University**

**School of Graduate Studies**

**Faculty of Humanities**

**Department of Foreign Literature**

**Comparative Analysis on the Portrayal of Women Characters in  
Three Prominent Novels from the Islamic World**

**Fanta Ayalew**

June 2012

# **Comparative Analysis on the Portrayal of Women Characters in Three Prominent Novels from the Islamic World**

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By

Fanta Ayalew

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## Abstract

This study was undertaken to analyze the similarity of women's handling by the Islamic societies in different Islamic and/or Arab countries in the world as reconstructed in the novels randomly selected. These countries from which these novels are taken are Afghanistan, Egypt, and Iran, and these countries are deemed to represent both the Islamic and Arab world, two synonymous terms with minor difference.

In these novels, the themes and the entire stories are all about women's life; as to how they are treated by the social systems, by men, and by the Islamic religion at large. In these novels, women are characterized as subhuman according to the exploration of this study.

In all of the three novels, women are found to be items of commodity to be sold or exchanged or spared anytime if men like to do so. The governments in the settings of the novels do almost nothing to protect the human and citizenship rights of women's. Based on the Scripture of the Holy Koran, elites of the Islamic religion have formulated a law called *Sharia*, and according to this Law, especially women are expected to preserve certain rules such as wearing veils (hijab, burqa, chador, etc.), avoiding cosmetics and ornaments, not attending modern schools other than religious ones, not going out of their houses or homes without being accompanied by male escorts, not making love out of marital bond, not speaking to a man unless spoken to, not joining the working force as employee, etc.

The study shows that women are victims of polygamy and underage marriage to a man even of as high as forty and above years of their senior. They are sexually abused by incestuous sexual relationship and when such happenings are identified, women are punished by flogging and/or stoning to death due to trespassing the *Sharia* Law of adultery while on the other hand the men who commit the same crime or sin are given deaf ear by the systems.

Based on the findings of the study, it is strongly recommended that religious scholars all over the world in general and Islamic elites of all sects in particular need to reconsider their religious dogmas and rituals and revise them in accordance with the human consciousness of the 21<sup>st</sup> century so that religions and modern societies of the present world could go side by side without one condemning the other due to lack of sound interpretation and application of scriptures. If any measure is not going to be taken in time, it seems that the population would gradually revolt against some of the rules that it considers are hindrances for the reign of social justice as the closure of churches is said to have been a sign of such phenomenal happening in Europe and other western countries.

## Introduction

To begin with, let us take note of these two terms: Islam and Arab, by extension, Islamic World or the Arab World. According to its dictionary meaning, Arab means, ‘a person from the Middle East or North Africa who speaks Arabic as a first language’ (Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary) or according to Microsoft Encarta Dictionary, an Arab is ‘a member of Semitic people who speaks Arabic and lives throughout North Africa and Southwest Asia’. When we see the meaning of Islam, we get that it is the Muslim religion and the people and countries who believe in it or according to Encarta, ‘a monotheistic religion based on the word of God as revealed to Muhammad during the 7th century’. (Ibid, Islam) Therefore, we can infer that Arab is more related to the culture and language of the people while Islam is to that of the religion irrespective of language, geography, and culture. For example, countries such as Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran are not Arab countries, though they may have few numbers of them as minorities. But Islamic religion is the predominant one in these countries, 98.8% and 99.6% respectively. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_by\\_Muslim\\_population](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_Muslim_population))

By the same token, let’s see the meanings of two other similar terms which are interchangeably used in the paper: female and woman. According to the Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, female is meant: “belonging or relating to women, or the sex that can give birth to young or produce eggs.” And this same dictionary defines woman like this: “an adult female human being.” Therefore, in brief we can say that these two terms have nearly the same significance or meaning. The difference could vary when we use them in terms of some specific reference like for example, we employ female in the general sense of referring a human being who is not male irrespective of her age while we use woman when a female reaches the stage of adulthood.

The current picture of this world seems the ugliest of all other historical scenarios when compared with especially the level of damage that may result from the people armed with modern and sophisticated weapons of mass destruction. This threat is oft-reiterated by so many people from all walks of life. One of them is Max Born, German – British physicist and Nobel laureate who lived from 1882 to 1970. He stated his worry of the consequence of man’s civilization especially in terms of nuclear power and the radiation thereof: “The human race has today the means for annihilating itself—either in a fit of complete lunacy, i.e., in a big war, by a brief fit of destruction, or by careless handling of atomic technology, through a slow process of poisoning and

of deterioration in its genetic structure.” (Microsoft Encarta, quotes on nuclear). Apart from the suffering of people globally we observe through the daily media presentations, what is more worse and devastating is the attitude some residents of our planet have against each other. Inarguably, whenever anything bad occurs anywhere, the first victims are women and children along with people in their old age. A scholar known as Sam Harris clearly states the aforementioned danger in his book *End of Faith* as follows;

This world is simply ablaze with bad ideas. There are still places where people are put to death for imaginary crimes—like blasphemy—and where the totality of a child's education consists of his learning to recite from an ancient book of religious fiction. **There are countries where women are denied almost every human liberty, except the liberty to breed.** And yet, these same societies are quickly acquiring terrifying arsenals of advanced weaponry. If we cannot inspire the developing world, and the Muslim world in particular, to pursue ends that are compatible with a global civilization, then a dark future awaits all of us. (emphasis mine, 2005: 224)

As Harris has nicely put it in the quote here above, in this sophisticated age of science and technology, in this civilized time of the 21st century, in this millennium of highest globalization the history of mankind has ever witnessed in a recorded manner, there are many Islamic countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Algeria, Iran and the likes that have become the black sheep of the rest of the world in terms of especially treating the major half of their society, the WOMEN.

To our practical knowledge, in many of these Islamic countries, women are considered as subhuman. This state of being subhuman in these countries takes priority over any of the theories and theoreticians we know in any of the fields in natural or social sciences. As a matter of fact, most literary concepts or theories such as feminism and other forms of –isms and schools of thoughts have been proliferating a little bit before, as far back as the time of renaissance, and during and after the period of colonialism. But the [double] suppression of women is believed to have been taking place since the time of the emergence of man as a social being. In this regard, among ancient literary legacies, we can mention some major religious books as evidence to how the old as well as the current states and societies of many Islamic countries are thoroughly influenced by them to mishandle their counterparts, women, in the society. In light of this, the Bible and the Quran are the ones to be taken into account with respect to molding the mode of thought of people (their followers) in general and with specific reference to Islamic people in particular, envisaged in terms of focus of this paper.

Islamic laws, most of which are derived from the Quran and the Sunnah that consists of the Hadith, are known for their stringency with respect to their strict rules and regulations on women. While we see women in the western hemisphere and in other non-Arab countries of the world assuming political power to the extent of being presidents and PMs, leave alone MPs, ministers with a variety of portfolios, commissioners, managers, in many of the Arab countries, leave alone assuming such grandiose political and economic positions, they are not even at times allowed to drive a car, have a job, exercise their human and citizenship rights, don the vest they wish or can afford to buy, go freely alone without chaperone, have and marry their own choice, etc. Women in the Arab world are not totally deemed as human beings with human needs and interests. These realities are best reflected in many fictional works of many women and men authors, in and out of the countries in question, among which this paper dwells on three novels written about the double oppression of women in the Islamic world.

In this paper, an attempt will be made to show how women characters are depicted in three novels from three different countries by two female and one male authors; these authors are from Afghanistan, Egypt, and Iran, all of which are Islamic states.

These prominent novels are selected randomly and are considered to be able to show the suffering of women in the Islamic world. The problems of women in these countries have been simmering from time immemorial. But no government of such brutal statehood has ever tried to positively respond to or address the wailings of women. It is these authors that have tried to at least show what suffering is imposed upon our sisters and mothers in those countries.

The characters in the novels face untold vicissitudes. They face hellish troubles mostly created by men and by the social system established long ago with no apparent change of modus operandi. They try to get out of the entanglement, but the social framework is not conducive for them to succeed in their struggle. Therefore, they take the last option based on the old maxim of 'to be or not to be' and at the stage of self-realization they fight, in whatever means available, even to the extent of voluntarily accepting death, the patriarchal system to which they give the blame for their suffering.

# Chapter One

## Background, Statement, Objectives, and Significance of the Study

### 1.1 Background of the Study

From the very beginning of human life, it is believed by many and lots of literatures corroborate the notion that women were placed at a much lower rung of the social ladder. To this lamentable phenomenon that has created an alarming imbalance between the yin and the yang, which according to the Chinese philosophy the yin, i.e. the darkness, the negative force, represents the female and the yang, i.e. the light, the positive force, represents the male, people of all ages have been forwarding their own reasons. Some say it is genetic, some others say it is religious; some say it is biological, some others say it is cultural. To whichever attribute it is ascribed to, the undeniable fact is that women are vulnerable to mistreatment in many societies and at times great disparity is visible between men and women, especially among traditional societies. This is especially true in the Arab or Islamic world. (Microsoft Encarta, 2009 edition; Fisher, 1999:219). Some even venture the difference to a combination of two or more of the above mentioned factors that have resulted in the sorry state of women in our societies.

In the Christians' Bible,(there are different bibles as well such as Woman's Bible, Devil's Bible and so on) there it is said:

Yahweh God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a helpmate. So from the soil ...God fashioned all the wild beasts and all the birds of heaven. ... But no helpmate suitable for the man was found for him. So Yahweh God made the man fall into a deep sleep. And while he slept he took one of his ribs and enclosed and brought her to the man. The man exclaimed,

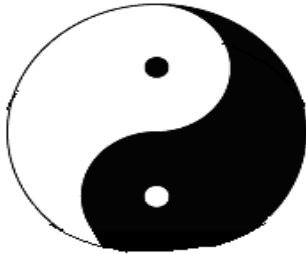
This at last is born from my bone,  
And flesh from my flesh,  
This is to be called woman,  
For this was taken from the man.

(The Jerusalem Bible, Genesis; 2 :18-23)

Biblically, in addition to what is stated here above, we can have scores of statements that assign women the second rate status when compared with that of men. The fact that a woman is created from the rib of man by itself may give to some people a sense of less importance to women.

To once more remind readers of the Chinese philosophy which was mentioned here in passing above, let us see the following quote and realize how especially the Chinese women, could have been affected due to this societal belief. According to the source, the diagram is meant to show the belief's central tenet that women's part of the circle, which is equal in size with that of the men, is black in color and that of the men is white; as white usually indicates purity and

brightness while dark is usually used as a symbol of mourning and bad luck, even now in our daily life.



Yin and Yang, opposite and complementary forces in Chinese thought, from Chinese words meaning “shaded” and “sunny.” Beginning in the early 4th century BC Chinese philosophers wrote about yin and yang in terms of the environment, especially the shaded and sunny sides of a hill. **By the end of that century yin became associated with everything dark, moist, receptive, earthy, and female, whereas yang was bright, dry, active, heavenly, and male.** Yin and yang were believed to combine in various proportions to produce all the different objects in the universe. ( Emphasis mine, Microsoft Encarta 2009 ed.,)

From this Chinese philosophical belief, that may influence millions of people worldwide even out of the territories of this huge nation with a population of 1.3 billion currently, we can learn that women’s life could have been affected tremendously in a degree not less than those three religious books: the Christian Bible, the Judaic Talmud/Torah/Old Testament they share with the Christians, and Islamic Kuran/Quran have inflicted upon them for centuries.

Whichever factor(s) has/have resulted in the bitter scenario for women, more evidently in the less developed countries, the fact on the ground is saddening and unfortunate. This is more so in the Islamic world and this reality is vividly reflected in the themes of many twenty- first century novels like the ones focused in this paper. Therefore, it should be given due attention and be exposed to the public in a form of literary analysis so that the issue gets proper awareness in the society. From among many such feministic creative fictional works, this paper treats three novels written by three prominent authors from three [different] Islamic nations.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Gender issue is one of the burning problems of this world at a global level. Though the magnitude might be more here less there, nevertheless, the issue of gender especially nowadays, is considered to be among the first rate headaches of nations. Addressing this problem, in any way possible, is therefore timely and may contribute its share for the enhancement of gender equality. As a matter of fact, nowadays, addressing gender issues is being equated with addressing the issue of human rights. A society is believed to be half full or half empty without the involvement of genders, men and women, on equal footing. Owing to this general truth, nationally and internationally, we can take it for granted that there are hundreds and thousands of NGOs, government offices, and other economic, social and legal institutions that partially or solely work on gender issues.

In light of this, this paper tries to show the attempts made by three authors of the Islamic/ Arab world, their concern with regard to the mishandling of women by the patriarchal society, with a specific reference to the Islamic world.

As a matter of fact, Ethiopia is neither Islamic nor Arab country. Though in her history the country was said to be, “an Island of Christianity”, due to the predominance of this religion, especially during the time of Christian kings, nonetheless, that old belief has been on the wane after the ascension unto power of the Dergue regime, some 37 years back in 1974 to 1991. Since the time of the Dergue the divorce of church and state has been realized in such a way that one is legally free of the other and now the country is constitutionally secular. (Vide the constitution of PDRE)

However, it is not deniable that the Muslim population is growing fast in Ethiopia. According to *The Pew Research Center*, USA, 33.8% of the Ethiopian population is Muslim. And depending, may be, on their vested interests, some other documents publish conflicting reports on this issue of Muslim and Christian populations; for example, according to Edmond J. Keller, Microsoft Encarta’s contributor, it is believed that half of the population of Ethiopia is Muslim while an Islamic website I accessed bulges this number to 65%. (<http://www.muslimpopulation.com/index.html>)

Whatever the case, though it is a little bit early to say that the influence of Islamic fundamentalism is on the scene to bring about frightening changes of constitution that would wed state and religion like the ones we see now in Saudi or Iran, or like the Alshabab in neighboring Somalia and the Boko Haram in Nigeria who are fighting for the same cause of imposing *Shari’a* law and now burning Christians along with their churches, or the Tuaregs of Mali who have recently succeeded in controlling the northern part of the country and have declared an Islamic state named ‘Azawad’ under the auspices of *Shari’a* Law, it is nevertheless very vital to show the public how this threat is dangerous especially in minimizing the rights of women in case such scenario is likely to appear in Ethiopia. In fact, we can witness now that there is a tendency everywhere in Addis Ababa that Muslim women are observed wearing veils such as burqa or chador or hijab, in whichever name we may call it, even in public gatherings and higher education institutions, in a country wherein there is no an obligation of such religious practices. This could be taken positive in a sense of preserving their religious rights on individual basis and on the other hand it could be taken as a reflection of their distaste to the cultural adulteration we observe especially in females’ western attire that exposes their sexually provocative body parts in the country and/or maybe it could be their reaction to the murmur of non-Muslim community about their vests [Just to mean, ‘my veil is none of your business!’ We will see this issue later in the discussion.]. But if this trend develops into institutional level and entails coercive application of the *Shari’a* law in the country, as we see now in some Islamic countries such as Iran and Saudi wherein all women of any religion are forced to abide by this Islamic law, the impact on those women who do want to exercise their right of free choice would tremendously be frightening and disastrous. May be due to lack of such fear among the elites in Ethiopia, I couldn’t find any research attempt on this subject. Surprisingly, the majority of the academia seems not to have sufficient awareness about the treatment of Muslim women in other Islamic nations and if that situation comes to Ethiopia, no one seems to have any knowledge on how to challenge it before it takes deep roots and robs the rights of particularly women. In addition, it is quite disheartening to notice that reading such books like “*Reading Lolita in Tehran*” and “*Woman at Point Zero*” in

Ethiopia is somewhat too leisurely due to the theme they have, leave alone to carry out certain analytic literary works based on them. Therefore, I hope it would be very important to bridge the gap between our potential problem and our silence not to at least imagine any concern about the threat suggested here above if we get one research attempt with respect to the treatment of women in the societies mentioned in the novels of this study. As the writers of the novels are themselves Muslims, I verily hope so, this paper is also expected to awaken both Muslim men and women to put out the fire before it is even ignited in Ethiopia, with the hope that the signs are not yet within the horizons, through the free lessons we are currently learning from countries in which our sisters, mothers, children, and old people are being massacred by suicidal detonations with no apparent crime other than worshipping their deity in their mosques or churches or synagogues, or shopping in malls and open markets, or maybe attending ceremonies such as weddings.

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

The major objective of this study is investigating and analyzing the place women are given in the Islamic countries as reflected in the novels selected.

#### **Some specific objectives:**

- I.** Showing the role and authority of men and women with respect to marriage, inheritance, and home management.
- II.** Indicating freedom of movement and access to education for women.
- III.** Showing how women are exposed to the problems they are forced to face.
- IV.** Showing the struggle of women characters in the novels in a bid to come out of their problems.

### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

It is quite obvious that the Muslim population in the world is increasing from time to time. This is also true here in Ethiopia and simultaneously the researcher believes that the growth of Islamic population per se is not a threat to anyone out of Islam; it is rather a welcoming progress albeit the fanatic approach to any religion should by no means be encouraged by anyone. Nevertheless, we have to be open-minded to admit problems and I believe we have problems too. In light of this, it is vitally important to show the sordid experience of women in the other part of the world so that our women population could take the necessary precaution and awareness not to lose their human and religious rights as it is the case to the women in the novels. To this end, this paper would benefit those readers, especially women, who have interest in gender equality and those whom are part of the policy making organ so that they could come up with certain options as a solution for the problems created by non-religiously inducted cultural practices that are intermingled with the religious rituals which are not originally meant to harm, especially the female population in Islam. The researcher believes that traditional/cultural and/or religious practices sometimes, if not always, knowingly or unknowingly deviate from the fundamental virtuous intentions of religions and some people may misuse or abuse some verses from the scriptures for their own personal interests or there could be misinterpretations or misconceptions thereof that could create major fallacies among the followers. This is something we should admit

as universal; not a specificity of this or that religion or society. Therefore, it would be advisable to the reader of this paper to see all sides of the arguments incorporated in the analysis before reaching at any judgmental predisposition. In addition, the writer believes that such literary endeavors based on the novels of the Islamic world written especially on gender issues are rare; hence, this attempt would help other students of the Faculty as a springboard for their further studies.

### **1.5 Scope of the Study**

This paper focuses on three novels, as mentioned earlier, written by three authors from different Islamic nations which speak different languages, albeit their state religion is the same. The study tries to show how women are treated and what their reactions look like towards the treatment, whether good or bad, they encounter especially from the male counterparts and the established social system of their societies, irrespective of gender difference in this specific factor, of course, as it is reconstructed in the novels. Though every fabric of any given society, such as religion, culture, and politics, is interwoven in such a way that one resides under the shade of the other, this paper attempts much not to purposely get deeper into religion and politics. And hence, based on the way they are depicted in the novels, the scope of the study revolves around the handling of women especially by men and the system they both are governed under the rules and regulations of the countries in question.

### **1.6 Limitations of the Study**

The following are the limitations of this study:-

- I.** Selecting only three novels written about this same subject of ‘Women in the Arab World’ due to time and resource constraints;
- II.** Analyzing the novels only from the perspective of the treatment of women in Islamic societies, not in other societies with different religions or cultures but maybe with similar treatment;
- III.** Not touching any other fictional aspects of the novels, such as writing style and language use;
- IV.** Not making any value judgments, except on what is depicted in the novels, on the Islamic societies in general.

### **1.7 Organization of the Study**

This research endeavor is designed along the line of investigating and analyzing the common features in the treatment of women by the social systems and men dominated social hierarchies of the Islamic world as they are reflected in the novels selected. To do this, three novels of three authors from three different Islamic nations are randomly taken and are presented in five chapters. To see whether these novels have anything in common with regard to the handling of women, comparative analysis technique is employed.

All in all, there are five chapters in this paper. In the preceding chapter, the statement of the problem, research questions, research objectives and other similar preliminary but vitally necessary points tasks are presented.

Before the major analytic work is given in the penultimate chapter, first, the novels are critically read and common denominators or similar mistreatments with respect to the handling of women characters in the novels are taken in special notes for further consideration.

Second, based on the parameters designed, which are indicated under Chapter Four on the list of table of contents, those common features are analyzed in a comparative manner to see if women characters in the novels face similar treatments and share the fate formulated by the male dominated socio economic structures of the Islamic countries mentioned in the books.

Third, in Chapter Five, the findings, recommendations, and conclusion are presented.

## **1.8 Methodology**

This paper employs descriptive method of research. In light of this, first, the novels selected are read thoroughly and carefully before the synopsis of each novel is given separately. Next to that, they are analyzed from the perspective of women's oppression by the social norms and male dominated patriarchal practices of each nation. In actual fact, the suppression and mishandling of women in the Islamic or Arab world, as reflected in the novels selected, predates all literary school of thoughts and movements such as feminism or patriarchy in literary theories. Nonetheless, an attempt will be made to connect the suffering those sisters and mothers in the novels face with some aspects of the 19th century literary criticism, such as the ones mentioned here above, viz., feminism and patriarchy. Thus, the presentation of the research is qualitative in nature. And it relies on the primary sources, i.e. the three novels selected, and some other secondary sources available I hard and/or soft copies.

## Chapter Two

### Review of Related Literature

Under this chapter, some issues related to the subject under discussion will be presented briefly. After dealing in brief with the short description about the authors, these issues mainly focus on the review of some rights of women in Islamic scriptures and prior studies on this same subject of women in the fictional or memoir-type works of Islamic authors.

#### 2.1 Authors of the Novels in Brief

Nawal El Saadawi of Egypt, Azar Nafisi of Iran, and Khaled Hosseini of Afghan-American authors are globally renowned literary figures. On top of this, three of them are reputed activists and feminist writers. They have many literary and other academic contributions to their respective countries and to the people of the rest of the world.

“Woman at Point Zero” is one of Dr. Saadawi’s novels that argue about women’s rights in Egypt. This is just only one among many other novels, short stories, and essays, both fictional and/or non-fictional. Though professionally she is medical doctor, through the call of her special nature, she has composed countless literary pieces that have enabled her to receive numerous rewards and certifications of merit.

“Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books,” is also one of the few literary works of Dr. Azar Nafisi who’s professionally an outstanding woman of literature. She is Iranian and has spent much of her time in the west before and after the Iranian revolution of 1978/9. Her memoir has earned much international recognition and rewards to the author. She lives in the US now teaching literature, the right to which she is deprived of in her own country due to the peculiar ideology of the Islamic regime in Tehran.

“A Thousand Splendid Suns,” is Khaled Hosseini’s literary contribution to the realm of literature. This man is Afghan-American who lives in the US now. His first novel was “The Kite Runner” and this one is his second. Both novels are acclaimed throughout the world for their enlightening content. He has earned much appraisal and rewards out of these two books, even to the extent of becoming an ambassador of goodwill appointed by the UN.

If we examine literary critiques, we can understand that lots of criticisms and theses have been made on these three novels all over the world; we can be sure that many in the kingdom of literature are acquainted with these spectacular works of literature.

These three authors and feminist writers have done their best to expose the evil doings of the society and governments towards women under the cover of religion and male dominated cultural practices, especially in the Muslim world. When they do this noble job of advocating for the voiceless oppressed women, they are not free of real and imagined lashes from their respective governments. For example, Saadawi was imprisoned and made out of her job; likewise, Nafisi was also made off her teaching job for her advocacy for the women’s rights in Iran before she was let to run out of Tehran in the mid 90s. Therefore, they have been paying sacrifice. Nevertheless, their efforts have been fruitful and nowadays thanks to them and other feminists (Islamic), the

international community is becoming aware of the plight of women especially in the Islamic world.

But before such wide spread awareness about feministic issues was possible to happen worldwide, there are some pioneer female feminists whose literary contribution and political activism paid off a lot towards this same end. "Examples of women's right pioneers and feminist are: Elizabeth Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, Julia Ward, Catherine Acholonu, Simi Afonja, Olabisi Aina, Mariama Ba, Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta."( Leke, 2011). Before feminism began in its modern form during the 20th and late 19th centuries, it is known in the field of literature that there have been outstanding feminine figures in the history of feminism such as Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote a book entitled "A Vindication of the Right of Women" (1792), who dedicated their entire efforts for the equal rights of women with men.

## 2.2 The Rights of Women in Islamic Scriptures

Generally speaking, to whichever direction we stare at or whichever religion we happen to thoroughly examine:

Women are suppressed, disregarded and abused by every religion in the world. They are considered inferior to men by these organizations and are therefore condemned to be a second class type of person. A great many women have no rights at all. As a consequence, the men, especially through their religious faiths, threaten and strictly prohibit the utilization of an unlimited amount of talent and abilities within women. These forms of discrimination occur within Christianity and its sects and also in all other religions and their associated sects, as the following brief excerpts prove:

*"Men are above the women, because Allah has given the one part superiority above the other."* (Koran: Sura 4)

"One hundred girls are not worth as much as one boy." Confucius

"A woman must never enjoy independence." Hinduism

"The women shall be servants to their men who are their masters." Christian Bible: Paul to the Ephesians in the New Testament (<http://raphaelonline.com/womenreligion.htm>)

This has been true throughout the years in the past millennia. Women were and still are oppressed by religions and consequently by men who have been head of almost all religions in this world.

Nonetheless, there are some scholars who witness that women's rights were far worse than the present day or the years followed after the coming into religious and political power of Prophet Mohammad and hence the Prophet had conceded some significant rights to women when compared to the pre-Islamic era, these rights, among others, include, the rights of property ownership and inheritance, which are by now said to have been compromised in some Arab nations.

Let us see the following extract taken from the Wikipedia;

William Montgomery Watt states that Muhammad, in the historical context of his time, can be seen as a figure who testified on behalf of women's rights and improved things considerably. Watt explains: 'At the time Islam began, the conditions of women were terrible - they had no right to own property, were supposed to be the property of the man, and if the man died everything went to his sons.' Muhammad, however, by 'instituting rights of property

ownership, inheritance, education and divorce, gave women certain basic safeguards.’ Haddad and Esposito state that ‘Muhammad granted women rights and privileges in the sphere of family life, marriage, education, and economic endeavors, rights that help improve women's status in society.’ (accessed on March 24, 2012)

But although it is suggested that women’s rights were relatively in a better condition after the emergence of the Islamic religion during and after the sixth century C.E, the situation of women in this geopolitical expanse is not likely to seem as it is expounded by people of scholasticism or religion. Due to that many studies tell us that, though their efforts were highly precarious due to the nature of the socio-cultural setup of the nations they belong to, there have been a lot of feminist struggles in the Islamic World as there have been in the west as well.

### **2.3 Revisit of Prior Studies Undertaken**

In Ethiopia, it is reasonable to suggest that there could rarely exist research works such as this one for a number of reasons. In the first place, this country is secular and the constitution clearly states that state and religion are separate. Secondly, in terms of population, the number of Moslem population currently doesn’t seem to have numeric supremacy in such a way that Islam along with its theocratic tradition comes to power and change the constitution like the Iranian revolution of the 1978/9 which had deposed the then Shah and reinstated Islamic Sharia. Due to these and other pertinent reasons, students of literature do not seem to be attracted to work on Islamic novels with respect to women’s treatment by Moslem men or the social system they happen to be ruled by.

Nevertheless, though I couldn’t get the trace of it, I have heard that a certain graduate student, namely Alem Banchi Mekonnen, is said to have made her MA thesis on similar subject. I checked the catalog at the ILS library, I couldn’t find the paper. It would have been useful if I had got it.

Other than women characters depicted in the novels of Islamic writers such as Saadawi and Nafisi or Hosseini, there are many critical analyses and comparative studies of female characters made by graduate students on African and Ethiopian novels, in both English and Amharic books. Among these, those of Yihenew Melese, “*A Female Reading of Tobbya and Endewotach Kerech*”(2002), Yodit Admasu’s “*The Portrayal of Women in Selected Novels of Peter Abrahams and Ayi Kwei Armah*”(2007), and Tekle T/Lidet’s “*The Portrayal of Major Female Characters in Four Amharic Films*” (2008) are just few examples. These papers generally have something to say in regard to feminism and related issues like patriarchy along with its developments through time but not as such about the suffering or mistreatment of women in the Islamic or Arab world based on or as reconstructed in some prominent books from the Islamic world, leave alone to get literary works made on the novels selected herein this thesis. Therefore, it is almost difficult to compare this thesis with another one so that it would be fair to comment in comparison unless we judge it by itself.

Globally, as it is mentioned a bit earlier, we get scores of literary works based on the three of these novels. For example, a critic called Saiful Saleem has made a critique under the title “*Of Tangerines and Oranges: An Analysis of Nawal el Saadawi's Woman at Point Zero*” and he says the following about this gripping novel:

Through the character Firdaus, Saadawi introduces a world where men dominate over women in almost every aspect of life. In the novel, men are largely depicted as maintaining their authority through violence and physical acts. Firdaus grows up accepting this as how things are and, like many Egyptian women of the time, she fits into the submissive role that society dictates of her. Later, she recognizes that she no longer wants to be a “slave” and rather wants to be a “master” [of her destiny]. By murdering the pimp and later confessing to it, she believes that she has finally achieved control over her own life and has become free. (unoccupiedpress.com, accessed on June 6, 2012)

If we see the literary effect of Nafisi’s memoir, we simply get it wonderful. Since its publication, it has triumphed lots of appraisals and rewards. Let’s the following to know as to how it was welcome by the American society:

Like Hollywood producers, book publishers want to duplicate a proven formula for success. The aftereffects of the Iranian emigrée Azar Nafisi’s best-selling 2003 memoir, ‘Reading Lolita in Tehran,’ which focused on a closeted female book club studying Western literature after the 1979 revolution, offer an interesting case in point.

The years since Nafisi’s book appeared have seen the American publication of a host of women’s memoirs of Iran: Afschineh Latifi’s “Even After All This Time: A Story of Love, Revolution, and Leaving Iran”; Roya Hakakian’s “Journey From the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran”; Nahid Rachlin’s “Persian Girls”; Azadeh Moaveni’s “Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran”; and the graphic memoirs of Marjane Satrapi, “Persepolis” and “Persepolis 2.” This year alone has seen the publication of novels by the Iranian-American Porochista Khakpour (“Sons and Other Flammable Objects”) and Dalia Sofer (who depicts a Jewish Iranian family and their Muslim neighbors in “The Septembers of Shiraz”). (Elizabeth Haynes, thenewyorktimes.com, accessed on 5/6/2012)

As Nana Asfour explains in an article posted on the net, women’s life in Tehran is absolutely difficult and quite worsened when compared with that the Shah’s regime before the 1979 revolution. Quoting Nafisi, she says the following in her literary critique written on the novel called the “*Caspian Rain*” authored by Judo-Iranian feminist writer, Gina Nahai:

Nafisi, whose mother was among the first women to be elected to the Majlis (Iranian Parliament), explains that ‘when I was growing up, in the 1960s, there was little difference between my rights and the rights of women in Western democracies.’ But in *Caspian Rain*, wife abuse is common, divorce is out of the question, baby girls are considered liabilities, inheritance money is immediately granted to the male offspring, and children are the father’s possession. In essence, many of the restrictions on women that have come to be associated with post revolutionary Iran were firmly in place under the Shah.

We can realize from the above quotes that Nafisi’s literary work has inspired many people, especially women, to write their own experience and fight for their rights. We can keep on dwelling on such literary extensions of these three novels unless we shorten it here.

## 2.4 Theoretical Framework

To begin with, “comparative research is a research methodology in the social sciences that aims to make comparisons across different countries or cultures,” and it can be defined as “comparative research, simply put, is the act of comparing two or more things with a view to discovering something about one or all of the things being compared,”(Wikipedia, accessed on 7/6/2012) or it can be described as, according to thefreedictionary.com, “of or relating to the scientific or historical comparison of different phenomena, institutions, or objects, such as

languages, legal systems, or anatomical structures, in an effort to understand their origins or relationships.”(accessed on 5/6/2012) Therefore, in this paper three novels are comparatively examined to see if there is any similarity especially with respect to the handling of women in those countries wherein the authors originate as vernacular citizens, though two of them, Nafisi and Hosseini, have great deal of exposure to western life since their childhood.

Under the discussion of the theoretical framework, we shall see feminism in general, Islamic feminism in particular, and patriarchy as the bottom line of our analysis. Because it is with these basic literary concepts and theories that the subject matter of this study is directly related.

### 2.4.1 Feminism in General

Inarguably, following the coming into existence of a variety of school of thoughts in world’s history, there appear to exist countless *-isms* in both fields of social and natural sciences. If we flip the catalogs of libraries or browse/google the URLs of the net, there we get zillions of information and knowledge about those *-isms* and other literary works of both men and women in a form of fictional and non-fictional books, research papers, journals, articles, and so on. These *-isms* are indicative of the differences of people especially in the realms of education, politics, economics, philosophy and other fields of both streams of the conventional science and in the metaphysical world of parapsychology and paranormal phenomena which usually deal with the intangible spiritual life of people and nature by and large. And it is worth reminding here that these *-isms* are representatives of various movements in favor of or against the concepts they hold up. Just to randomly mention a few of them, out of those tens of hundreds and beyond which could derive from names of people like Marxism, we can just search such *-isms* like Existentialism, Realism, Naturalism, Despotism, Communism, Nihilism, Pessimism, Optimism, Narcissism, Nepotism, Romanticism, Classicism, Neoclassicism, Buddhism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, Cynicism, Skepticism, Federalism, Feudalism, Cosmopolitanism, Confucianism, Scholasticism, Capitalism, Socialism, Hedonism, Vandalism, Racism, Atheism, Islamism, Satanism, FEMINISM, &c.

In feminism alone, we have also subdivisions that treat this issue of women in a variety of approaches such as liberal feminism, cultural feminism, and radical feminism(Thomas Teo, 2005:116), and one more, different from other subdivisions and very nascent one is Islamic feminism which “is a form of feminism concerned with the role of women in Islam,” and “ aims for the full equality of all Muslims, regardless of gender, in public and private life.” (Wikipedia website, accessed on March 27, 2012)

Though giving definitions to concepts is not easy, due to the fact that people who give definitions vary depending on their social and intellectual background, feminism is defined as the following, according to some dictionaries and scholars/renowned figures:

1. Fem-i-nism[fem-uh-niz-uh m]  
-noun
  1. the doctrine advocating social, political, and all other rights of women equal to those of men.
2. ( sometimes initial capital letter ) an organized movement for the attainment of such rights for women.

### 3. feminine character.

Origin: 1890–95; < French *féminisme*;

(Dictionary.com Unabridged Based on the Random House Dictionary, © Random House, Inc. 2011.)

2. Feminism [is a] collective term for systems of belief and theories that pay special attention to women's rights and women's position in culture and society. The term tends to be used for the women's rights movement, which began in the late 18th century and continues to campaign for complete political, social, and economic equality between women and men. (Lois W. Banner, contributor, Microsoft Encarta, 2009 ed.)

### 3. Feminism

at first, "state of being feminine;" sense of "advocacy of women's rights" in 1895.

Source: Online Etymology Dictionary, © 2010 Douglas Harper

4. Feminism refers to movements aimed at defining, establishing and defending equal political, economic, and social rights and equal opportunities for women. Its concepts overlap with those of women's rights. Feminism is mainly focused on women's issues, but because feminism seeks gender equality, some feminists argue that men's liberation is therefore a necessary part of feminism, and that men are also harmed by sexism and gender roles. Feminists—that is, persons practicing feminism—can be persons of either sex.

(Wikipedia, website, accessed on March 27, 2012)

### 5. Feminism

- a doctrine that advocates equal rights for women  
[wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn](http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn)
- The term feminism can be used to describe a political, cultural or economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. Feminism involves political, cultural and sociological theories, as well as philosophies concerned with issues of gender difference. ...  
[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminism)
- A social theory or political movement supporting the equality of both sexes in all aspects of public and private life; specifically, a theory or movement that argues that legal and social restrictions on females must be removed in order to bring about such equality;

Feminism, especially as a movement in the west, is said to have different phases which are expressed as 'waves'. The following excerpt from Wikipedia describes them:

The history of the modern western feminist movements is divided into three "waves". Each is described as dealing with different aspects of the same feminist issues. The first wave refers to the movement of the 19th through early 20th centuries, which dealt mainly with suffrage, working conditions and educational rights for women and girls. The second wave (1960s-1980s) dealt with the inequality of laws, as well as cultural inequalities and the role of women in society. The third wave of feminism (late 1980s-early 2000s (decade)), is seen as both a continuation of the second wave and a response to the perceived failures. (accessed on March 26, 2012)

When we see feminism in general, there are some trends that tend to expand the case of women's issue beyond the normal curve, i.e, beyond the question of bridging the gap between the two sexes with respect to the preservation of equal rights and opportunities. For example, some want to focus on and wail at the biological difference which is natural and at times necessary. The fact that men are predominantly stronger than women doesn't mean they are unequal in other circumstances, as some may attribute the inequality to such minor cases. It is a natural phenomenon and shouldn't be included in the discussion of equality and equity. With this respect, Mary Wollstonecraft, in her "*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*" expresses that any biological or natural difference shall be something to be neither proud nor ashamed of.

Yet, because I am a woman, I would not lead my readers to suppose that I mean violently to agitate the contested question respecting the quality or inferiority of the sex; but as the subject lies in my way, and I cannot pass it over without subjecting the main tendency of my reasoning to misconstruction, I shall stop a moment to deliver, in a few words, my opinion. In the government of the physical world it is observable that the female in point of strength is, in general, inferior to the male. This is the law of Nature; and it does not appear to be suspended or abrogated in favor of woman. A degree of physical superiority cannot, therefore, be denied, and it is a noble prerogative! But not content with this natural preeminence, men endeavor to sink us still lower, merely to render us alluring objects for a moment; and women, intoxicated by the adoration which men, under the influence of their senses, pay them, do not seek to obtain a durable interest in their hearts, or to become the friends of the fellow-creatures who find amusement in their society. (1929: 2)

One among the renowned twentieth century French existentialists, Simone de Beauvoir as mentioned in her book, "*The Second Sex*", believes that some feminists want to over propagate and derail the case of women from the main path of demanding their rights into sensational non-useful arguments by over-dwelling on the personal stands of individuals such as St. Thomas or Aristotle on women; she rather says women have to go farther than this and must liberate themselves from the oppression they face due to patriarchal systems through practical moves.(1949:3) Whether Aristotle said 'we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness', or St. Thomas Aquinas repeated it in other words and said 'the female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities,' these views are personal and shouldn't be the bone of contention for disagreement in the struggle of feminists against any gender based imbalance. (Ibid: loc. cit) Of course, it should be noted here that the influence of religious books such as the Bible which declares that the '*Second Sex*' as allegorically assumed to be Eve and she is 'a supernumerary bone of Adam', along with the additional bruising views of some historically known persons, such as the aforementioned Aristotle, St. Thomas, or Bossuet may be considered as inflammatory and a great disservice to the achievement of feministic efforts.(Ibid)

We can go on explaining or elaborating feminism from various angles and sources. However, leaving aside all circumlocutory polemics on which according to Beauvoir, "Enough ink has been spilled in quarrelling over [it], and perhaps we should say no more about it," and yet "it is still talked about... for the voluminous nonsense uttered during the last century seems to have done little to illuminate the problem," in the main, what we have to understand is that feminism's and feminists' central tenet is the observance of equality and justice between sexes in all societies

based on an egalitarian social system. And that system should treat its members with equal justice to all, not only on paper in fact, as it is the case in many instances, with provisions of equal opportunities to all citizens irrespective of gender difference and shouldn't give any discriminatory advantage to either of the sexes, albeit we may tolerate positive discrimination such as giving special considerations to the disadvantaged social groups or individuals.

To once again mention gender with respect to a narrower perspective, let us dwell for sometime on what people say about the specific term known as feminism the definitions of which are given earlier. In the field of literature, it is obvious that there are a number of theories and movements depending on various grounds such as time and people's view or attitude towards this or that conceptual entity. In this regard, feminism in literature is one of the many literary movements according to Yihenew (2004: 5), that had come into formal existence since the 1960s, but as mentioned a bit earlier, the inequality and the suffering thereof of women had and still are persevering emerged and came to life since Biblical times. With respect to the nomenclature of feminism, Yihenew states that scholars call it in both terms as 'Feminisms' and 'Feminist Approaches' in their belief that there are different kinds of feminisms. (ibid: 5).

According to Routledge History of Philosophy, Volume X, feminism has wider and contested meanings and as to the types of feminists, it also states that there are different kinds of them which treat various issues of women in a variety of fields. It says the following with respect to its meaning and function as well as what has been thought of women from the time of Plato to the present.

At one level, feminists can be thought of as occupying various positions along the previous political spectrum. There are conservative feminists, liberal feminists and socialist feminists. Which has the legitimate claim to the name 'feminists' is itself a contested question within feminism. But to focus on those differences is to miss the originality and intellectual power of feminism as a philosophical position.

Feminism is a comparatively new social movement. Where Rawls and Nozick can carry on a debate by developing positions already articulated by Kant and Locke, many feminists are uneasy about helping themselves too readily to the arguments and outlooks of philosophers who, whatever other disagreements they may have had, verged on unanimity in their relegation of women to second-class status. From Plato to the middle ages, women were thought of as imperfect realizations of the ideal male form; from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, they were seen as a different kind of thing, subject to feeling rather than reason, and incapable of participating in public life.(1997:203)

The concept of feminism by and large is the same: that is, according to Ruthven (1984: 95), as cited by Yihenew, "All its activities home in on the same despised center." This 'despised' center is meant to be the woman. Therefore, this critical theory revolves around, according to Yihenew, a central assumption which is explained as follows:

Most feminists hold a belief that women as a group are treated oppressively and differently from men and that they are subject to personal and institutional discrimination. Feminists also believe that the society is organized in much a way that it works, in general, to the benefit of men rather than women; that is, it is patriarchal. (ibid: 6)

Many scholars wrote about the poor treatment of women by societies and their husbands as well with the conviction of the fact that almost all societies have been patriarchal which in most cases has never been conducive for women to establish harmonious co-existence with their male partners on equal footing. Moreover, the role of husbands over their housewives has been given much attention in that women are subdued to inferior life due to their economic dependence. Among these scholars Frederick Engles and Alison M. Jaggar could be mentioned here now. Engles, as mentioned by Jaggar sees feminism from the angle of what he believes in, that is from the socialistic and communistic point of view. As especially elders recall from the cold war of the two blocs, viz., capitalism and socialism/communism before the fall of the United Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR), this man and others such as Lenin, Marx, and other contemporaries were the pioneers and vanguards in the socialist bloc. Hence, as communists were fond of especially two antonymic words, the bourgeois and the proletariat, their vision towards many things was tuned from the point of view of these polarized terms. Let us see the following: “In the great majority of cases today, at least in the possessing classes, the husband is obligated to earn a living and support his family, and that in itself gives him a position of supremacy without any need for special legal titles and privileges. Within the family, he is the bourgeois, and the wife the proletariat. (1983:218) With this regard of the dominance of the husband over his wife, Jaggar states the following and this also works greatly in the domain of this study due to the fact that in Islamic laws women in general are not allowed to have jobs and go out of their homes; surprisingly, it is a public secret too, that they are not even allowed to attend any burial ceremony (vide infra in the analysis for the restrictions imposed upon them):

Once married, the dominance of the husband is expected in a continuing sexual double standard. What for the woman is a crime entailing grave legal and social consequences is considered honorable in a man or, at the worse, a slight moral blemish which he cheerfully bears. Female adultery certainly occurs, but it is far more risky and subject to far greater social sanctions than adultery by men. Economic considerations ... make women put up with the habitual infidelity of their husbands – concerns for their own means of existence and still more for their children’s future....(op.cit, 219)

#### **2.4.2 Islamic Feminism**

As it is mentioned earlier, Islamic feminism is a recent phenomenon which can be defined as “a form of feminism concerned with the role of women in Islam,” and “aims for the full equality of all Muslims, regardless of gender, in public and private life.” (ibid, Wikipedia)

According to an Article contributed to Microsoft Encarta, in Islamic countries there “a secular, liberal feminism has developed that seeks to eliminate discrimination against women and to outlaw practices such as polygyny (multiple wives), purdah (seclusion in the home), and limitation of the right of divorce to the husband,” which have been the major suppressive means of women by men.(Redmond, Microsoft Encarta, 2008) It is because of these violations of women’s rights that many Islamic feminists have been involved in struggling to bring about changes in Islamic societies. According to Mojab, feminists such as Mah Sharaf Khanun, an Iranian poet and

feminist, have paid the maximum price, i.e. death, in their struggle against the tyranny of the patriarchal hegemony in the 19th century.(op. cit, loc cit.)

As some scholars depict in their research papers, Islamic feminism goes back even to the pre-Islamic era. Accordingly, studies show that Prophet Muhammad brought about some significant positive changes in the improvement of women's life during his religious leadership, though it was not recognized as feminism we know today and the changes were not that much adorable when compared to that of our expectations nowadays.

As Miriam Cooke stated in her survey of Arab women's writings under the title: "Telling Their Lives: A Hundred Years of Arab Women's Writings", we can learn that there have been many male and female feminists in the Islamic World. Among prominent feminist writers and activists that contributed a lot in the past 100 years Cooke mentioned are – Egypt's Qasim Amin ( a man, whose known literary feminist work is 'Tahrir al-Mar'a (Liberation of Women), Aisha al Taimuriya, Warda al-Yazigi, Zainab Eawwaz, May Zaideh, Rabindranath Tagore(this one from India), Etel Adnan, and Afni Nasif(from Islamic nations). (<http://www.jstor.org>, accessed on 01/03/2012 05:17) These are just a few and the list doesn't include those of today's feminists and activists of the region such as Nawal El Saadawi and Azar Nafisi.

Even though women's right of suffrage in almost all countries of the world, except few which still remained obstinate not to allow women to have this universal right, was gradually ensured in many countries, especially as of early 20th century after western suffragettes launched their campaign to achieve this right, it is worth mentioning here that even nowadays not all Islamic countries are the same in handling their women with this regard. With respect to holding back women's right of voting and being candidate in any election, in a pleasing side of some Islamic countries there are relatively lenient ones in terms of empowering women and enabling those capable women even to reach the level of serving their nations as presidents, PMs, and MPs like for example Pakistan and others where there is a vast majority of Muslim population. Let us have a look at the following:

Muslim majority countries have produced several female head of states and prime ministers: Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, Mame Madior Boye of Senegal, Tansu Çiller of Turkey, Kaqusha Jashari of Kosovo, and Megawati Sukarnoputri of Indonesia. Bangladesh was the second country in the world (after Mary and Elizabeth I in 16th century England) to have one female head of state follow another, those two being Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina. (Wikipedia, accessed on March 26, 2012)

In connection with the Arab or Islamic World, feminism has also a long history of origin in its own version of the Islamic religion and culture. According to Wikipedia's sources Islamic feminism is described as follows:

Islamic feminism is a form of feminism concerned with the role of women in Islam. It aims for the full equality of all Muslims, regardless of gender, in public and private life. Islamic feminists advocate women's rights, gender equality, and social justice grounded in an Islamic framework. Although rooted in Islam, the movement's pioneers have also utilized secular and European or non-Muslim feminist discourses and recognize the role of Islamic feminism as part of an integrated global feminist movement.

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic\\_feminism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_feminism))

In addition, this source says that, “advocates of the movement seek to highlight the deeply rooted teachings of equality in the religion, and encourage a questioning of the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic teaching through the Qur’an (holy book), hadith (sayings of Prophet Muhammad) and sharia (law) towards the creation of a more equal and just society.” (ibid, lo cit.)

With respect to its origin, Shahrzad Mojab, in an article under the title, Theorizing the Politics of ‘Islamic feminism’, states that Islamic feminism “is of a recent origins, used for the first time in the 1990s in the growing western literature on ‘women and Islam’.” But Mojab adds on, “Islamic intellectual encounters with feminism date back to the early twentieth century.” (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1395633>)

### 2.4.3 Patriarchy

One important term that goes along with feminism is patriarchy. In short, it refers to the “social organization which produces and guarantees superior status for the male and inferior for the female.” (Jaggar: op.cit. 7) and this is more true in the Arab or Islamic world based on the fictional depiction in the novels selected and the day to day reports of the mainstream media.

When we come to its definition, it can be defined as a “rule by the father or a male authority,” and with respect to its origin “the word *patriarchy* comes from the Latin word *pater*, which means *father*” and “it most often refers to the political power and authority of males in a society.” Moreover, “Patriarchy can also refer to the power of fathers within families.” (Barbara R. Cruikshank, contributor, Microsoft Encarta, 2009)

As it is indicated above, patriarchy is the dominance of male authority over female subjects beginning from home to state level. If we see most of governments in today’s world, we can easily witness that most parliamentary and presidential seats are held by men, with rare cases like France whose newly elected president, Françoise Hollande, has promised to equalize the number of men and women in his ministerial cabinet. This scenario, the fact that many countries in the world have the majority of male authorities, itself tells us a lot that women are marginalized in many aspects of the social and economic benefits and there is a crucial need to empower them for better societal picture. Let us consider the following quote to learn how a society is labeled as patriarchal and the women of that society are disadvantaged as a result:

A society is considered patriarchal when men establish or inherit a social order where they dominate positions of power and authority or when important achievements and historical events are attributed to the actions of men. For example, the Roman Catholic Church believes that God the Father passed down his authority to the bishops, who are sometimes called patriarchs. In the Roman Catholic Church, only men are allowed to be bishops. In the United States the men who signed the Constitution are referred to as ‘founding fathers.’ A society may also be considered patriarchal when the heads of households or leaders of the country must possess conventionally accepted male attributes, such as physical strength or aggressive behavior, to gain and keep their positions. (Jaggar. 1983, 219.)

It is based on the concepts mentioned here above, viz., feminism, Islamic feminism, and patriarchy, that this study treats the condition of women in some three Islamic nations as reflected in those three prominent novels written by three different authors.

## **2.5 Conceptual Framework**

In this paper, common issues such as absence of justice for women, sexual abuse by husbands or family members, or any male member of the society are used as inputs to analyze the similarity of women's mistreatment in those three countries about which the novels are written. The injustices committed upon women characters are separately noted and registered. The status of women and men with respect to human and citizenship rights will be observed. All opportunities such as job opportunities, access for education, the right of inheritance, marital relationships, judicial or legal services, are thoroughly observed from the point of view of the equity and equality between men and women in the setting of the novels selected. Moreover, the attitude of one gender to the other will be observed in order to identify who respects/disrespects whom and why.

In light of the above, the study will be expected to show whether the aforementioned research paradigms are maintained and the social equilibrium is preserved in an egalitarian manner between men and women or not, and if not maintained, as the case is likely to be true that women are discriminated against in various ways, leave alone in creative works but also in real life, an exploration will be carried out to see if women are able to face the cultural and religious burdens and challenges imposed upon them through the male dominated patriarchal hegemony. This exploration will take place beginning from the level of family to the level of society and beyond and the causes of the discrepancy will be sorted out by analyzing the interactions, actions, inactions or narrations of the characters as the case may be.

## Chapter Three

### Comparative Analysis on the Portrayal of Women Characters in Three Prominent Novels from the Islamic World

#### 3.1 Synopses of the Novels

As it is mentioned earlier in the preceding sections of this paper, these captivatingly worth reading novels are written by people whose origin is Islam and most likely who might have been Muslims unless any conversion has taken place through time. Understandably, the novels' themes pivots around Islamic women living in the countries the novels are written about. But it could be surmised that we can take a lesson about how women are treated in the name of religion and culture and can learn much how to handle similar cases related to women in our societies. To this end, let us see next the synopsis of each novel and grasp the main idea before we go to the analysis. (By the way, my efforts to get some words from the horse's mouth, from these authors, couldn't be realized though I tried much through their email addresses. None of them responded to my quest; may be they are too busy or too old to entertain such requests, like Saadawi who is around 82 by now. Nevertheless, I tried my best to get anything about them via their websites and facebook accounts and I have attached some information about them in the 'Appendices' section.)

##### 3.1.1 '*Woman at Point Zero*', (by Nawal El Saadawi, from Egypt)

This novel of Nawal El Saadawi (Dr.) was originally written in Arabic, as all of her novels and other literary works as well are, in 1973 in Beirut, and later translated into English (in 1983) and in many other languages, more than 30 world languages, to be more specific. This Egyptian prolific novelist is not only a novelist; she is an outspoken woman of versatility. In addition to her being novelist, she is playwright, essayist, feminist, activist, and psychiatrist with a credential of doctorate degree in medical science specializing in psychiatry. Many of her fictional and non-fictional works focus on women's oppression by the society and the social system. She is seldom heard opposing religions; but she doesn't hesitate to criticize the people in the religion, for example, in "*God Dies by the Nile*", it is mentioned in "*Woman at Point zero*" that she says, "*People have become corrupt everywhere. You can search in vain for Islam, or a devout Muslim. They no longer exist.*" (cf. endnote pages.) Truly speaking, this is a great saying which could lead Islamic Fundamentalists to pass '*fatwa*' against her and put some millions of dollars as bounty on her head unless fate has forbidden it.

"*Woman at Point Zero*", (114 pages, excluding the two endnote pages) is based on real experience of a woman with the name Firdaus and is narrated by first person point of view; at the beginning by the author herself as a psychiatrist, who goes to prison to interview the jailed victim, the aforementioned woman character, who again narrates her vicissitudes throughout the novel and at the end Saadawi again takes up the narration and dwells on some leaves to give the synopsis of what Firdaus has lexically and emotionally been expressing, to what extent she was mentally and physically suffering, to what degree she was dehumanized and forced to kill one 'bastard pimp' after she was emotionally changed to craziness, etc.

There is poor Firdaus, a woman in prison who is 'happily' waiting her execution after being convicted of killing a man, and who has defiantly shunned the advice to write an appeal letter to the president of the country for pardon and commutation of the death sentence to a lesser punishment. This Firdaus is different from other inmates in that jail. She never speaks with any body; she considers herself as an alien who has come to earth for suffering. She always contemplates staring at nothing or at the sky. Saadawi, the author, gets informed of this situation and becomes excited to know something about this special woman in prison and goes to her cell to visit and ask her for an informal interview in case she can extend some psychological/psychiatric help to her; but she repeatedly refuses saying that she was no more interested in contacting any one, for she claimed that she had already made up her mind and had convinced herself that she no more belonged to this world. But the novel gets life when Firdaus all of a sudden changes her mind and sends a message to Saadawi to come to the cell and contact her, just a day before her execution.

Saadawi goes silent for about 103 pages after she is warned by Firdaus in this manner: "*Let me speak. Don't interrupt me. They are coming to take me at six o'clock this evening. Tomorrow morning I shall no longer be here. Nor will I be in any place known to man. This journey to a place unknown to everybody on this earth fills me with pride.*"(Page 9)

Firdaus speaks as freely as a babe. She seems to have reached the highest level of self actualization. She seems to have tried everything to make life meaningful, but blames the social system dominated by males to have ruined her earthly dreams and now she is no more in any form of disposition to stay in Egypt even for a second. It seems that she is impatiently waiting for her death. She is psychologically ready to be killed; and she knows well that she is dying in vain just to quench the murderous nature of the unjust system she extremely abhors.

Her father used to beat her mother when she was a child. She learns that wives are there in homes to be beaten and mistreated by males. Her father and mother, who used to live in an abject poverty, die before she joins any school. Her uncle, an 'erudite' uncle who is schooled to an educational level that enables him to be an officer in the civil service, takes her to Cairo to raise her. She is molested by this uncle before he marries another woman, a cruel woman to Firdaus. She joins a school in Cairo. In her school, she always scores high marks, and finally graduates her secondary school with flying colors, to the extent of being second in her school, seventh in the entire Egypt.

After completing the secondary, she fails to join any higher education due to lack of financial support. Her uncle, who is victimized by the influence of his wife, refuses to pay tuition fee for her, saying that he is poor. She keeps on tasting the bitter fruits of life. Her uncle and his wife conspire to marry off her to an old uncle of the wife, on one hand to receive one or two 100 pounds of dowry, according to the marital custom, and on the other hand to get rid of her from their house. That person, a retiree who leads a frugal life on little pension, is victim of deformity whose swelling on his chin frequently emits nasty smell. She is forced to marry him for the simple reason that she eats 'twice as' the children of her uncle. But the marriage comes to an end and she gets obligated to join the world of prostitution. In prostitution she somehow manages to survive

and gradually earn money that enables her to lead better life. Nevertheless, she becomes disgusted of life in prostitution because it is not respectable job, as she learns later from one of her clients. She tries to find any respectable job whatever the amount of the salary is. She gets one in a certain company. But after she was betrayed by someone whom she was in love, she goes back to prostitution once again. She starts to get much money. In due course of time, a certain pimp, who forces prostitutes to marry him and become his protégée, approaches her and tries to coerce her to control her money. Succumbed to his intimidation, she willy nilly allows him to take the money she earns but refuses to sleep with him because she begins to realize that she has a right to choose with whom she would sleep, not only to be chosen. This time around her consciousness becomes strikingly exotic. She nearly stops to live for her body, rather she focuses living for her conscience; she refuses to ‘sleep’ with men she labels as trivial and nonsense. That pimp who feigns he loves her and acts as her husband, comes with a knife to frighten and force her to sleep with him. She becomes exasperated and enters into an ecstasy which changes her emotion into wildness and as though possessed by certain supernatural force, she abruptly snatches from him the knife and stabs him to death. What is wonderful here is that she doesn’t admit that she has killed a person. When the police ask her about the killing she committed, she tells them this: “I am a killer, but I’ve committed no crime. Like you, I kill only criminals,”(page 109) though this statement which says,” Like you, I kill only criminals,” doesn’t conform to her stand in the novel, because she believes the police along with the system they serve are all criminals and kill the innocent and they are there to serve the chosen few of the patriarchal system. Anyhow, she is finally executed.

### 3.1.2 ‘*Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*’ (by Azar Nafisi, from the Islamic Republic of Iran)

In Amharic language there is a saying, a saying that refers to masculine gender, whose English approximate meaning could be like this: “A prophet is not respected in his own country” (ገብር ገብር ገብርገብር). By the same token, Dr. Azar Nafisi is one of Iran’s assets, but never liked by the current regime due to her progressive stands, especially on women’s treatment in that Islamic nation. She left her country in her teenage with her family in the time of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (Shah in short) before the Islamic revolution in 1978/1979. After ten years of stay abroad, she comes back home during the revolution thinking the change would enable her to contribute what she could to her country. She begins teaching English literature in Tehran University but due to her refusal to wear the veil, she gets the sack from whichever higher education institution she joins. It is then that she begins to conduct informal classes with seven of her female students at her own home in a clandestine manner. This woman of high personality with distinguished mental caliber, Azar Nafisi, is a renowned international iconic figure, especially in Islamic feminism. She is currently teaching literature at *The Johns Hopkins University*, Washington D.C. (For further details, please refer to her CV attached in the ‘Appendices’ section.)

“*Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*” is a bestselling book to which the *Geraldine Books* praised it like this: “Anyone who has ever belonged to a book group must read this book.” And it deserves too, to the best understanding and reconnoitering experience of the

researcher of this study. This novel shows how literature liberates and enlightens people to the extent of obeying one's conscience instead of traditionally following the path of cultural and religious norms and mores which need to be refined and redefined as well according to the consciousness of the time in question.

It got its name from the novel, entitled 'Lolita' by Vladimir Nabokov, "a Russian American novelist, poet, and critic, whose highly inventive writings earned him critical acclaim as a major 20<sup>th</sup> century literary figure." (M. Encarta, 2009) When Nafisi was expelled from her teaching job due to her stand on the Islamic veil that she refused to wear it at all, in her time of discomfort she devised a means to forget the vicissitude she was forced to encounter. To this end, she selected seven of her committed female students and invited them to a private literature class which took place on Thursdays at her own home. This was not for a living; it was just for an outlet of their grievance against the regime which forced them to wear veils and to strictly follow the *Shari'a* law according to the interest of the system, not of theirs. In an interview Nafisi gave to a reading group known as "*Random House Reader's Circle*", she underscores the theme of the novel as follows: "What I really wanted to investigate was how people cope when they live under an oppressive reality. How do they create for themselves open spaces through their imaginations? That is really the main theme of the book – imagination's role in opening spaces, in resisting tyrannies of both politics and time." (<http://www.randomhouse.ca/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9781588360793=auqa>)

In that literature study group setup by Nafisi, eight of them, who had different backgrounds in many aspects, enjoyed various readings of literary works from the west which mainly included, "forbidden works of Western literature". With regard to the group members, they were "shy and uncomfortable at first, [but] soon began to open up, not only about the novels they were reading but also about their own dreams and disappointments. Their personal stories intertwine with those they are reading". In connection to what they selected to read in that small group, among others, they read and discussed "*Pride and Prejudice, Washington Square, Daisy Miller and Lolita* – their Lolita, as they imagined her in Tehran." (back cover page) Lolita is, by the way a female character from which one of the novels of Vladimir Nabokov has got its title.

The majority of the content of this memoir is the literature discussion undertaken by these seven women in tightly enclosed home, on the other hand the novel gives much account on the personal experiences of Azar Nafisi herself in relation to the old and the new regime as well, as what she encountered abroad and at home, before, during, and after the revolution of the Ayatollahs which she blames has downsized the rights of Iranians, especially of women. She regrettably mentions in this memoir that during the Shah's regime both men and women enjoyed relatively better human and religious rights. She condemns the latter regime as Islamic fundamentalist, beginning from the change of the name of the country from Iran to Islamic Republic of Iran, while she praises the former as secular and relatively lenient, especially with respect to women's rights. In this memoir, she elaborates what life looks like in Iran and how most distinctively women suffer. The female students come to her home wearing their veils. But as soon as they enter Nafisi's home, they put off the chador or the veil in sigh of relief and put it aside until they go out. They enjoy their choice of clothing and ornaments, even cosmetics, which could result

in severe punishment according to Islamic law if they were caught disobeying outside Nafisi's home. After two years of interesting sessions, they finally quit those informal literature classes and disperse to various places; in 1997 Nafisi, along with her family, the husband, the bread winner of Nafisi's family in her testy times, and two children, goes to the US where she is residing and working to date.

### 3.1.3 'A Thousand Splendid Suns' (by Khaled Hosseini, from Afghanistan)

This novel was written by an Afghan-American author known as Dr. Khalid Hosseini and it is his second novel next to his bestselling fiction of 2003, *The Kite Runner*. By profession Khalid, like Saadawi, is medical doctor. This second novel of his has gotten him great admiration in the world. It was written in English in 2007.

In the novel on page 186 the author uses a character by the name Babi Said, the father of Laila, to pinpoint where the title of the novel is derived from. Babi reiterates two lines of the poem about Kabul written by an Iranian poet of the 17th century, Said Tabrizi, and says he has forgotten the rest. Another source adds two more verses on this same issue. The title of the book comes from one of the lines written by the aforesaid Iranian poet. The following are four lines of the verse taken from the Josephine Davis translation of the poem "Kabul".

Every street of Kabul is entralling to the eye  
Through the bazaars, caravans of Egypt pass  
One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs  
And the thousand splendid suns that hide behind her walls

([http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=A\\_Thousand\\_Splendid\\_Suns&oldid=470446253](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=A_Thousand_Splendid_Suns&oldid=470446253),  
accessed on March 26, 2012)

The central focus of this gripping novel of Khaled is depicting the turbulent lives of two Afghan women, Mariam and Laila, as to how their lives intermingle, of one with that of the other, the fictional duration of which spans from the 1960s to 2003. "The book was released on May 22, 2007, and received favorable prepublication reviews from Kirkus, Publishers Weekly, Library Journal, and Booklist, as well as reaching #2 on Amazon.com's bestseller list before its release." (ibid)

"*A Thousand Splendid Suns*," is 407 pages of interesting narration focusing especially on women's life in Afghanistan. It has four parts which interchangeably depict the lives of the aforementioned female characters along with the general situation of Afghanistan before, during, and after the coming unto power of the Taliban who are by now the major headache of that country. According to the daily news coverage of the main stream media like the BBC and Aljazeera, since the time they were ousted from power by the US-led NATO forces in 2001 after the incidence of the 9/11, these Taliban are said to be vying for Kabul and reinstate Islamic laws as before. The first part dwells solely on Mariam, the second and fourth parts on Laila, and the

third one switches its focus between Mariam and Laila interchangeably with each sub-part indicated only by numbers, no other words singly or in combination to serve as titles.

Mariam and her mother, Nana, live in a *kolba*, a traditional house, on the outskirts of Herat province where her wealthy father, Jalil, lives along with his three wives and nine children.[ as a matter of coincidence according to the Aljazeera news of the 18<sup>th</sup> of April, 2012, the renowned so called Islamic fundamentalist, Osama Bin Laden has also three wives and nine children whose deportation from Pakistan to Saudi was under discussion between the US and Islamabad, as the news told]. Due to the fact that Mariam is supposed to be his illegitimate daughter begotten out of wedlock, she cannot live with her siblings; instead, Jalil visits her on Thursdays with some presents and edibles. [This Thursday seems, by the way, a favorite day in Nafisi's and Khaled's novels.] On the fifteenth birthday, Mariam wants her father to take her to see a movie called *Pinocchio* which his movie theater was showing by then. But he remains adamant not to take her to his homestead for the movie show or for anything else she pleads for fear of being exposed to be a father of a *harami*, a name given to an illegitimate child as a curse, and he stops from coming to the *kolba*. [Just another 'by the way', this writer most often uses Afghan native words along with English, mostly without even giving a hint or clue to understand their meanings except our literary right to infer from the context]. When her father fails to show up, she goes directly to town and finds his house. But he refuses to even see her, and she ends up sleeping on the porch of his house. In the morning, after she failed to meet her father, Mariam comes back home to only find that Nana, her mother, has hanged herself out of fear that her only daughter has deserted her. When her father is informed of this incident, in lack of other options, he takes Mariam to his home and introduces her to her siblings. But she couldn't acclimatize herself with the living situation at her father's house due to the difference of life style she and other children have been in. In this awkward time for Mariam and her father as well, he arranges a plan to marry off her to a man named Rasheed who lives in Kabul getting his living in shoe making, and thirty years her senior; she was only fifteen by this time. In Kabul, Mariam becomes pregnant seven successive times, but is never able to carry a child to term, and Rasheed gradually becomes more abusive.

In Kabul, in the same neighborhood with Rasheed and Mariam there lives a girl named Laila and a boy named Tariq, who are close friends, but cautious of social restrictions. As time goes on, the civil war encroaches upon the political seat of Afghanistan, and Kabul falls under indiscriminate rocket bombardment from both sides of the government and the Taliban. Tariq's family decides to leave the city, and the emotional farewell between Laila and Tariq ends up with a one- time- only sexual contact at the moment of goodbyes. Laila's family also decides to leave Kabul, but as they are packing up, a rocket destroys the house, kills her parents, and severely injures Laila. Laila takes refuge in the house of Rasheed and Mariam.

After recovering from her injuries, Laila discovers that she is pregnant with Tariq's child. In due course of time Rasheed, who has been desperate for not having any child from Mariam, shows desire to have Laila as his second wife in addition to Mariam. He knows that she has someone, Tariq, whom she loves and believes that they didn't have sexual contact before Tariq left Kabul. To carry out his plan of marrying her, he designs a make-believe plot to make her informed the death of her childhood lover. After being told that Tariq is dead, she desperately agrees to marry Rasheed, who is eager to have a young and attractive second wife, and hopes to have a child with her. When Laila gives birth to a daughter named Aziza, Rasheed is displeased, and cognizant of the real father of the kid, he soon turns to be abusive toward Laila too. Mariam and Laila eventually become confidantes and best friends for they are suffering by the same individual who

is never satisfied with the atrocity he inflicts upon these two women. They plan to run away from Rasheed and leave Kabul, but they are caught at the bus station and come to his home. Rasheed beats them and deprives them of food and water for several days, almost killing Aziza.

A few years later, Laila gives birth to Zalmai, Rasheed's son. The Taliban have come to power, and there is a drought, and living conditions in Kabul become deteriorated. Rasheed's shoes workshop is set on fire and it totally gets burnt down, and he is forced to take jobs for which he is not fit. Rasheed sends Aziza to an orphanage. Then one day, Tariq appears outside the house. He and Laila are reunited, and their passions flare anew. When Rasheed returns home from work, Zalmai tells his father about the visitor.... One day Rasheed starts to savagely beat Laila, and Mariam, with full knowledge of the fatal consequence of her action, kills Rasheed with a shovel to be martyred later for the sake of love, for the sake of real love she was devoid of throughout her life but she observed so lately between Tariq and Laila. Afterwards, Mariam warns Laila to go away from that house and enjoy life with her lover and children and she surrenders to the police admitting she has killed her husband. She does everything she could to draw attention away from Laila and Tariq, and is executed soon, while on the other hand Laila and Tariq leave for Pakistan with their children, Aziza and Zalmai, the former Tariq's and the latter Rasheed's.

After the fall of the Taliban, Laila and Tariq return to Afghanistan. They stop in the village where Mariam was raised, and discover a package that Mariam's father left behind for her: a videotape of *Pinocchio*, a small pile of money and a letter. Laila reads the letter, a letter full of apologies and confessions, and discovers that Jalil regretted sending Mariam away. Laila and Tariq return to Kabul and fix up the orphanage, where Laila starts working as a teacher. Laila is pregnant with her third child, and if it is a girl, she has promised her name will be Mariam. But it is unfortunate for Mariam to have her name carved into the baby of Laila, because the book ends without having readers witnessing the accouchement of Laila; i.e, she still remains pregnant when we finish reading the novel, a sentence could have sufficed for Khaled to have Mariam a small memorial token from Laila if he volunteered to engage in imaginary midwifery and make Laila deliver a certain fictional clone of 'Mariam'. [Try to smile awhile, after all we are in the Realm of Literature!]

# Chapter Four

## Analysis of the Novels

### 4.1 Analysis of Common Issues Raised about Women

To begin with, according to the Wikipedia, there are around 750 million Muslim women in the world. The issues raised in these novels touch the life of these women in one way or another. Though, as it is mentioned earlier, the implementation of Islamic laws is relatively severe or lenient from nation to nation, nevertheless, the issues focused at in the books are considered to be communal to nearly all Islamic countries.

The world of humanity is possessed of two wings: the male and the female. So long as these two wings are not equivalent in strength, the bird will not fly. Until womankind reaches the same degree as man, until she enjoys the same arena of activity, extraordinary attainment or humanity will not be realized; When the two wings . . . become equivalent in strength, enjoying the same prerogatives, the flight of man will be exceedingly lofty and extraordinary.

(<http://reference.bahai.org/en/t/ab/SAB/sab-228.html>, accessed on 21/3/2012)

As the above quote truly expresses it, humanity in general is devoid of its essential element unless the wings of it, man and woman or male and female are situated at equilibrium in terms of all legal and human rights. As a bird is unable to fly properly if one of the wings is defective, by the same token, if one side of humanity, in our case the woman, is not treated equally with the other side, man, the balance of the symbiotic symmetry which should be observed amidst these beings would be affected negatively. And this negative imbalance would certainly stunt the growth and development of mankind; according to the aforementioned analogy, the bird cannot fly when and if one of its wings is faulty. In light of this, let us see how this equilibrium which we all should expect to be maintained in all societies is preserved or distorted in some of the Islamic countries as reconstructed in the novels selected.

#### 4.1.1 Absence of Justice for Women

As Ottaway states the condition of women in Islamic/Arabic countries by saying “Nowhere in the Arab world do women enjoy equal rights, let alone equal opportunities, with men,” (op cit., loc cit.), the novels I have selected to analyze also vividly depict this in the following manner.

In “*Woman at Point Zero*”, we observe acts of injustice from the childhood of Firdaus to the end of the novel. In her childhood, her father used to cause her mother suffer a lot. For example, when a female kid dies at their home, the father seems negligent to the mourning. But on the contrary, when a boy dies, he beats his wife as if she caused the death of the baby. This shows irrationality in husbands. Firdaus remembers the following about her father:

*When one of his female children died, my father would eat his supper, my mother would wash his legs, and then he would go to sleep, just as he did every*

*night. When the child that died was a boy, he would beat my mother, then have his supper and lie down to sleep. (p. 17)*

This indicates that boys are given special privilege in Islamic societies as, of course, is the case in some other communities as well. And having female children seems to be unlucky.

As the story edges towards its finale, there is an episode in which the protagonist, who lives on prostitution, after a failed marriage, quarrels with a pimp. The pimp threatens her to be her protector and share what she earns from the sex work she is engaged for a living. He refuses not to leave her alone and insists on being her protector or self appointed aide. He knows that he has an upper hand over her due to his ties with the police and other legal institutions. She, on the other hand, tells him that she would use her legal right to protect herself from his threats, but in vain. After some commotional argument on the right of Firdaus to be free of any pimp, she goes to apply for police's help to solve this illegal act of the pimp, but he jeeringly laughs at her for he knows that her attempt is futile due to his connections and the skewed nature of legal provisions towards women. She explains this as follows:

*I went to the police, only to discover that he had better connections than I. 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.*

*And this man, this pimp whose name was Marzouk, enjoyed a good laugh as he watched me from a distance, striving in vain to find some way of protecting myself from him. One day he saw me entering my house and followed me. I tried to shut the door in his face, but he took out a knife, threatened me with it, and forced his way in.*

*"What do you want of me?"*

*"I want to protect you from other men," he replied.*

*"But no one else besides you is menacing me."*

*"If it is not me, it will be someone else. There are pimps running around everywhere. If you want me to marry you, I am perfectly willing to do so."*

*"I don't see the need for you to marry me as well. It's enough that you take what I earn. My body at least is mine."... (p. 101)*

We learn from the above dialogic communication between Firdaus and Marzouk, the pimp, that the rules and regulations of at least the time in which this novel was written were favoring men. As the conflict goes on between these two 'equal citizens' of Egypt, the woman lacks any solution to get out of the injustice imposed by the social system headed by men everywhere in the country and she takes her own measure she thinks appropriate and just.

In "A Thousand Splendid Suns" as well, we observe injustices done on women. For example, we can see the injustice that happened to one of the female prisoners which explains how she was imprisoned for the same 'sin' of eloping with one man. The story is told by the narrator while the major character of this novel, Mariam, is waiting her execution.

*[Naghma] had tried to elope to Gardez with a young man she'd fallen in love with, the son of a local mullah. They'd barely made it out of Kabul. When they were caught and sent back, the mullah's son was flogged before he repented and said that Naghma had seduced him with her feminine charms. She'd cast a spell on him, he said. He promised he would rededicate himself to the study of the Koran. The mullah's son was freed. Naghma was sentenced to five years. (p. 354)*

This is an absolute injustice. In the first place, the 'crime' is eloping. As a matter of fact, to elope at least two persons should be involved in the action. In this case the mullah's son and Naghma are the ones who are said to be in love and hence intended and tried to elope, unsuccessful though. But we see the patriarchal injustice that it acquits the man from the same 'crime' they committed and incriminates the woman so that she serves five years of imprisonment. This shows the law is blind toward women. And this reminds us of the fact that Mariam's late mother told her as an advice in her childhood: *"Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam."*(*ibid*, loc. cit.)

As adding an insult to injury, this Naghma is waiting for a stab by her father as soon as she is set free from prison when she finishes the sentence. This is the result of the so called honor killing which is most often observed in Islamic countries to compensate the 'crime' or an 'offence' member of a family is believed to have committed and brings about shame on the family.

*It was just as well, she said, her being here in prison. Her father had sworn that the day she was released he would take a knife to her throat. (ibid, loc. cit.)*

In this same novel, we get one astonishing injustice on women. Mariam appears in court of law; she is being questioned by the judge, a young Talib judge. He asks her whether she had committed the crime of killing Rasheed or not. She proudly tells him that she did. But he is unable to understand how and why she tells him that. Instead, he says the following statements that show his misjudgment about the mental caliber of women in general citing the holy book of Islam.

*"I wonder," the young Talib said. "God has made us differently, you women and us men. Our brains are different. You are not able to think like we can. Western doctors and their science have proven this. This is why we require one male witness but two female ones." (p.355)*

This is an indication of the attitude Muslim men have about Muslim women. As literary works are the reflection of societal life, we can learn from this incident that women are mistreated in this way in courts where their cases are presented for judgment. At the same time we can observe how young Muslims in the Taliban or somewhere else are full of misconceptions about women.

It could be due to this misconception that the judgment on Mariam took only fifteen minutes.

*Mariam's trial had taken place the week before. There was no legal council, no public hearing, no cross-examining of evidences, no appeal. Mariam declined her right to witnesses. The entire thing lasted less than fifteen minutes. (ibid, loc. cit.)*

Consciousness wise, we understand here that Mariam is ahead of the system she is combating. We can ask “why does she decline from using her right of summoning witnesses?” We can surmise from the legal proceedings that she doesn't have any trust in the legal procedure of the country. She only waits for the proscribed judgment from the Taliban that gives priority to men instead of meting out equal sentences or treatments to both men and women according to what they do or don't do. This act of Mariam in the court is similar to that of Firdaus's in “*Woman at Point Zero*”. Their ‘crimes’, their confidence after they commit their ‘crimes’, the way they are treated in prison, the death penalty passed to each, their willingness to accept death just voluntarily, their conviction that they didn't commit crime, that what they have done is just and fair, their stand on the judiciary system of their respective countries, etc. are the same.

Moreover, if we read the following declaration issued and disseminated to the public by the Taliban after defeating the Mujahideen and entering Kabul, we can generally understand how the entire population of Afghanistan is expected to get used to the new law. As we hear from media presentations, the Taliban in Afghanistan are by now waging war to topple the current government and reinstate their strict Islamic law. The symptoms are seen as well in areas where they get control. In those areas of their control, for example, female students are not allowed to attend schools and the veil is a must and failure to obey their rules brings about punishments of flogging, in the least, or execution. This is what we learn from the media. For further information on this similar issue, we can see the instructions especially issued to women, along with the following general decree to all citizens.

*Our Watan is now known as the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan. These are the laws that we will enforce and you will obey:*

*All citizens must pray five times a day. If it is prayer time and you are caught doing something other, you will be beaten.*

*All men grow their beards. The correct length is at least one clenched fist beneath the chin. If you do not abide by this, you will be beaten.*

*All boys will wear turbans. Boys in grade one through six will wear black turbans, higher grades will wear white.*

*All boys will wear Islamic clothes. Shirt collars will be buttoned.*

*Singing is forbidden.*

*Dancing is forbidden.*

*Playing cards, playing chess, gambling, and kite flying are forbidden.*

*Writing books, watching films, and painting pictures are forbidden.*

*If you keep parakeets, you will be beaten. Your birds will be killed.*

*If you steal, your hand will be cut off at the wrist. If you steal again, your foot will be cut off.*

*If you are not Muslim, do not worship where you can be seen by Muslims. If you do, you will be beaten and imprisoned. If you are caught trying to convert a Muslim to your faith, you will be executed.*

*Attention Women:*

*You will stay inside your homes at all time. It is not proper for women to wander aimlessly about the streets. If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a mahram, a male relative. If you are caught alone in the street, you will be beaten and sent home.*

*You will not, under any circumstance, show your face. You will cover with burqa when outside. If you do not, you will be severely beaten.*

*Cosmetics are forbidden.*

*Jewelry is forbidden.*

*You will not wear charming clothes.*

*You will not speak unless spoken to.*

*You will not make eye contact with men.*

*You will not laugh in public. If you do, you will be beaten.*

*You will not paint your nails. If you do, you will lose a finger.*

*Girls are forbidden attending school. All schools for girls will be closed immediately.*

*Women are forbidden from working.*

*If you are found guilty of adultery, you will be stoned to death.*

*Listen. Listen well. Obey. Allah-u-akbar. ( A Thousand Splendid Suns, P. 271)*

The above instruction conveys many things with respect to how the entire population of Afghanistan was treated by the winners in general and how women were handled in that society in particular in the time during which the Taliban were in charge of leading the country under the *Shari'a* law. We can mention one injustice with regard to the burqa. Let us agree that it is good for women to wear veil for the sake of modesty or anything related to this. But how about the men? Don't they need to be modest with a kind of wearing made for similar purpose with that of the women? If we assume women must cover their body in order not to provoke men sexually, how about the men? Aren't they human beings susceptible to sexual feelings? What if they say, 'well, if we are supposed to wear the veil, you men also have to wear any clothing that covers your body in order not to provoke us, women, sexually.' This statement of women, if forwarded, should equally be seen in terms of human rights. Leaving aside the loophole that some people such as members in resistance organizations might abuse the burqa, as has been the case in Pakistan to hold hostage of a *Madrassa* school (which was finally bombed and innocent citizens were massacred when the mission failed some years back), that men wear it and go for a mission not to be identified as men, the very fact that it doesn't treat both men and women equally puts it under question in terms of human rights due to its double standards.

Similar to the aforementioned ruling of the Taliban, the Islamic Republic of Iran has also imposed such ban on women not to wear vests of their choice and not to move out of their house without their husband or male accompany; if, for example, a women does want to buy any item

from a shop or supermarket she has to be accompanied by a male escort. Nafisi herself says this about the veil she was forced to wear: “Little did I know that I would soon be given the choice of veiling or being jailed, flogged and perhaps killed if disobeyed.”(p.152) We can realize the fact that women could be preys of bullets or death by stoning if they disobeyed any minute instruction such as “wear this, don’t wear that” kind of too personal stuffs.

It should have been due to such alarming occurrences that the renowned Bangladeshi female feminist writer and activist Taslima Nasreen is quoted to have said, to *The Times*, “Our religion doesn't give women any human dignity. Women are considered slaves...I write against the religion because if women want to live like human beings, they will have to live outside the religion and Islamic law.” (Encarta, quote on feminism)

In “*Reading Lolita in Tehran*”, we observe injustice from page one to the end. Anyone who reads these two novels can easily understand that the winners of the 1978/79 revolution of Iran and that of the 1996 revolution of Afghanistan are almost similar in many aspects such as their stand on implementing the *Shari'a* law stated in the aforementioned directive issued by the Taliban. As a matter of fact, it is the prevalence of injustice that has led Azar Nafisi to write this memoir in book form. On the first page, the novel states that the political system in Iran doesn’t tolerate even seeing men and women together unless they are family members and it is due to that that Nafisi’s informal home class doesn’t entertain the accompany of male students while she selected only female ones:

*I chose seven of my best and most committed students and invited them to come to my home every Thursday morning to discuss literature. They were all women – to teach a mixed class in the privacy of my home was too risky, even if we were discussing harmless works of fiction. One persistent male student, although barred from our class, insisted on his rights. So he, Nima, read the assigned material, and on special days he would come to my house to talk about the books we were reading.” (p. 3)*

This ‘confession’ of Nafisi and the way they were running their classes, as depicted later in succeeding pages of the novel that they employed a maximal caution tell us a lot how they were suffering due to the merciless impositions the government laid upon its own citizens to check their human rights. It is, for example, unthinkable in any other secular country to impose a ruling that prescribes who should sit or go or sleep with whom. But it is a pity that in Iran and similar Islamic countries a female is not allowed even to be seen in public with a male partner who is not her husband or immediate family member.

In this memoir we read the following on page nine about the plight of female students in the University of Allameh Tabatabai, wherein Nafisi worked for some time, and which was relatively liberal and because of which its faculty was labeled as western, especially Switzerland, the byword that the regime used to call liberals to warn that they are in Iran not in the west.

*...Female students were being penalized for running up the stairs when they were late for classes, for laughing in hallways, for talking to members of the opposite sex. One day Sanaz had barged into class near the end of the session, crying. In*

*between bursts of tears, she explained that she was late because the female guards sat at the door, finding a blush in her bag, had tried to send her home with a reprimand.*

In “*Reading Lolita in Tehran*”, we see one major injustice through the literature group formed by the author, Azar Nafisi. This Iranian intellectual had left her country when she was thirteen and had an ample exposure of western democracy especially in the US where she had permanently been residing. After she decides to come back to her country to contribute her lot in the field of her profession, i.e., English literature, her family and she enter Iran with legal credentials. But she never finds the situation in Iran as she thought it to be. She is hired in various universities but she is forced to resign now and then due to the culture shock she faces especially with regard to the newly imposed veil or burqa and the issues she has to mention when she teaches western literature. She gets her class interesting but sometimes disgusting because of the arrogance of student-cadres of the regime. Due to the novels she selects to use as teaching aids and due to the arrogant view of the regime towards the west, she becomes a person of two irreconcilably antagonistic worlds out of which it is impossible for her to come out triumphant unless she resigns her job. To harass her, the cadres of the regime thrust papers with vulgar insults through her door, let’s look at this one, as an example:

*About two weeks into my second semester of teaching at Allameh, as soon as I opened the door to my office, I noticed on the floor an envelope that had been pushed under the door. I still have both the envelope and the yellowing piece of paper I found inside, folded once to fit. My name and address at the university was typed, but on piece of paper there is only one line, childish and as obscene as its message: **The adulterous Nafisi should be expelled.** This was the welcoming gift I received on my formal return to academia. (189)*

This piece of paper was meant to discourage her and make her expelled from the university by her own or by the administration; this copy of the insult was also given to the department head and the president of the university as well. Such breaches of human rights were undergoing for the simple reason that she was not obedient to the Islamic wearing and on top of that she was obedient to her consciences while teaching literature.

Because of the hatred the regime and its personnel have against the west, and they all consider the west as ‘decadent and immoral’, teachers and instructors were subjected to embarrassment in their classes as to what and how they do mention the works of renowned literary celebrities such as Jane Austin or Charles Dickens or Francis Scott Fitzgerald and others from whose literary works Nafisi’s literature class thoroughly discussed *Pride and Prejudice*, *Great Expectations*, and *The Great Gatsby*, respectively.(p.120)

The issues mentioned in Nafisi’s memoir can be substantiated by many research articles and books. One among these is found on the online virtual library of the renowned academic forum, JSTOR. A woman researcher known as Shahrzad Mojab, an Iranian herself, has vividly depicted the situation in Iran especially after the fall of the Shah’s regime. Quoting various prior works, she elaborates how women in general are treated during and after the revolution that they

are deprived of their right to serve their country as judges and due to that 100 women were expelled from courts. Besides the imposition of wearing veils and other restrictive measures on women, such as , surprisingly, barring them from opening a bank account and banning them from watching even football with their male partners or alone, the new Khomeinic regime had reversed the right of women from serving as judges. Quoting Kar and Paidar (1997:19 and 1995:236, respectively), Mojab describes this situation as follows:

Another case of legal reform relates to the right of women to judge. Denying the ability and right to judge is one of the well-known Islamic discriminations against women. It is an Islamic principle that women, because of their special physical and psychological state, are not able to be rational, cautious and neutral- qualities necessary for judging. Thus, in less than a month after coming to power and without waiting for legislation, the Islamic Republic dismissed all women judges, who numbered about 100. Women judges and trainees and their supporters engaged in demonstrations and weeks of sit-in in the Ministry of Justice. They were, however, reassigned to administrative positions within the judiciary. The position on women and judging questions the claim that this religion confers on women a status and respect unmatched in other religious or political orders. It has been the target of protests from inside and outside the country, and has made it difficult for the Islamic regime to justify its power of judging. (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1395633> .Accessed: 07/03/2012 04:18)

As a final point to this section, let us read the following quote from this same memoir of Nafisi to understand how the Ayatollahs dictate their people in Iran in general, not only of women in particular. But before that, let's take note of the speech of the first Ayatollah with which he scoffs at human rights by saying this ridiculous rhetoric: "Criminals shouldn't be tried. The trial of a criminal is against human rights. Human rights demand that we should have killed them in the first place when it became known that they were criminals."(p.96) He said this in his scornful response to the international human rights organizations for their protests against Iran's indefinite killing of citizens. As it is clearly depicted in this memoir of Nafisi, many women and men were executed in the wave of executions that ensued after the revolution. There was no trial, being suspected of having western attitude merely could be enough for execution. Now let us come to the quote that manifests how one citizen was executed without charges and if at all there were charges, how they were absolutely meaningless:

*NAME: Omid Gharib*

*SEX: male*

*DATE OF ARREST: 9 June 1980*

*PLACE OF ARREST: Tehran*

*PLACE OF DETENTION: Tehran, Qasr Prison*

*CHARGES: Being westernized, brought up in a westernized family, staying too long in Europe for his studies; smoking Winston cigarettes; displaying leftist tendencies.*

*SENTENCE: three years imprisonment; death*

*TRIAL INFORMATION: The accused was tried behind closed doors. He was arrested after the authorities intercepted a letter he had sent to his friend in France. He was sentenced to three years' imprisonment in 1980. On 2 February 1982, while Omid Gharib serving his prison term, his parents learned that he was executed. The circumstances surrounding his execution are not known.*

*ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:*

*DATE OF EXECUTION:* 31 January 1982

*PLACE OF EXECUTION:* Tehran

*SOURCE:* Amnesty International Newsletter, July 1982, volume XII, number 7. (p. 96-97)

This was, maybe still is, the Islamic Republic of Iran during the time setting of this memoir. Based on the aforementioned excerpt and more others in the novel, the regime seems to have been obsessed with the euphoria of killing. The author tells us that what she says in her novel is real except that she has modified the names and stories of her students to hide their being identified and exposed to danger. Therefore, what we learn from the above quote is meant real and we understand the fact that the people in the regime were intoxicated with the blood of their innocent citizens. What we call extrajudicial killing in certain contexts was underway in Tehran during those dark days of the country, and unless conditions are improved for better even now there could be such catastrophe in some cases, as we were able to hear from the media during the 2009 disputed election followed by protests, arrests, and killings as well.

#### **4.1.2 Sexual Abuse**

In terms of sexual abuse, we observe many incidents in three of the novels within or without marital relationships. In the first place, the fact that Firdaus in “Woman at Point Zero” and Mariam in “A Thousand Splendid Suns” are married off to men with old age by itself is sexual abuse. The age differences between Firdaus and Sheikh Mahmoud, just over 40 years, and that of between Mariam and Rasheed, over 30 years, clearly tell us that there is no sexual compatibility between the spouses as it is expected in marriage life. Therefore, as we read it from the novels, the sexual relationship between these couples is not less than a rape and is hence sexual abuse supported and allowed by the families of the females under the blessing of Islamic law.

In “Woman at Point Zero”, Firdaus is sexually abused repeatedly. She was abused by her uncle in her childhood when she was with him before he married. (p. 56) She was abused when she was married off to Sheikh Mahmoud most often than not without her willingness. She was abused to the extent of being forced to kiss him, leave alone the intercourse, on his smelly and deformed face in the name of love making. Let us have a look at this quote from the book to understand how she was involuntarily suffering from the sexual abuse she was encountering:

On his chin, below the lip, was a large swelling, with a hole in the middle. ...When the hole dried up, I let him kiss me. I could feel the swelling on my face and lips like a small purse, a water skin, full of a stagnant greasy fluid. But on days when it was not dry I would turn my lips and face away to avoid the odour of dead dogs which emanated from it. (p. 45)

Firdaus escapes from one ‘prison’, that of Mahmoud’s and after that a certain Bayoumi who works in a coffee house ‘helps’ her to pass some nights at his home. At the first day he seems kind, but soon his unkindness manifests and he begins sexually abusing her. Not only of abusing, insulting, and beating her, he also invites his friends to sexually abuse her anytime in a house

wherein he locked her until finally someone helped her break the door and make her escape, to another suffering though, to the street where the abuse continues there and beyond too.

Let us look at the following quote to see how she suffers from the abuse of one of the friends of Bayoumi.

*'Who are you?' I said.*

*'Bayuomi,' he answered.*

*I insisted, 'You are not Bayoumi. Who are you?'*

*'What a difference does it make?' Bayoumi and I are one.' Then he asked,*

*'Do you feel pleasure?'*

*'What did you say?' I enquired.*

*'Do you feel pleasure?' he repeated.*

*I was afraid to say I felt nothing so I closed my eyes once more and said 'Yes'.(p. 53)*

This friend of Bayoumi and Bayoumi himself badmouth her saying, 'bitch, slut, low woman' and some other touchy insults. Not only this, this lady, Firdaus, is sexually abused by the police, an employee of her once working place, the pimp whom she killed him at last, and by the prince on her way to nowhere after killing the pimp. It is this sexual abuse concomitant with other social and psychological problems that lead her to rebel against what she believes *the world of men*.

In "*Woman at Point Zero*", we read the following about the sexual suffering of women at home or else where, beginning from their immediate family members to anyone in the society. It is by Sharifa, a matron after Firdaus escapes the den of Bayoumi, that the following talk of sexual abuse on women is narrated.

*... "What did the son of a dog did to you?" [Sharifa to Firdaus]*

*... "Whom do you mean?"*

*... "Anyone of them, it doesn't make any difference. They're all the same, all sons of dogs, running around under various names. Mahmoud, Hassanein, Fawzy, Sabri, Ibrahim, Awadain, Bayoumi."*

*I interrupted her with a gasp. 'Bayoumi?'*

*She laughed out loud. I glimpsed her small, white pointed teeth, with a gold tooth right in the middle.*

*"I know them all. Which one of them started it? Your father, your brother ... one of your uncles?"*

*... "My uncle" I replied in low voice. (p. 55-56)*

Of the seven names Sharifa listed, the three have abused Firdaus before or after the presentation of this narration on the pages mentioned. The older lady, who seduces Firdaus to work with her as prostitute or in modern language sex worker, seems to have much knowledge about the treatment of women by men. And some more pages later in this same novel, Firdaus herself becomes fully aware of the situation, concludes that the least deluded woman is a prostitute that

can label her own price and the most pitiful creature is a housewife. Let us see the following with this regard:

*Now I was aware of the reality, of the truth. Now I knew what I wanted. Now there was no room for illusions. A successful prostitute was better than a misled saint. All women are victims of deception. Men impose deception on women and punish them for being deceived, force them down to the lowest level and punish them for falling so low, bind them in marriage and then chastise them with menial service for life, or insults, or blows.*

*Now I realized that the least deluded of all women was the prostitute. That marriage was the system built on the most cruel suffering for women. (p. 94)*

In a nutshell, there is no more convincing expression than what is stated here above to explain how women are abused even in marriage within which we expect nuptial partners should lead their marital life in an egalitarian manner.

In “*A Thousand Splendid Suns*”, in no less a degree as it is explained above, Rasheed, though seemingly kind and passionate in the first instances especially until she gets used to his home, after a week or so, obligates her to sleep with him and deflowers her by force, intimidating her saying, “[Do you think] that this is a hotel? That I am some kind of hotelkeeper?” and threatening he wouldn’t give her more time to stay intact as virgin.

Moreover, after the death of the family of Laila in Kabul when the Taliban were about to seize power and impose Shar’ia law, Rasheed rescues Laila from the rubble of her family’s home which was hit by a rocket. As Laila stays longer at his home, at the same time he goes on becoming much bitter on his wife, Mariam, due to his intent to add on another wife, the girl who is under his custody, i.e, Laila. Because Mariam couldn’t bear him any child, despite the fact that there had been more than seven times of failed attempts miscarried due to various reasons, Rasheed’s attention diverts to the new girl and he forces her to be his second wife. So, due to lack of any option for survival, this kid, Laila, becomes his wife in addition to Mariam. Rasheed continues abusing both until Mariam kills him finally and surrenders to the police.

In “*Reading Lolita in Tehran*”, as mentioned earlier, the revolutionary guards assigned to keep prisons rape those virgins given to them by their commanders for this same purpose of molesting, for they believe that virgins must be deflowered before they are executed. According to their belief, if a virgin is executed, she gets into heaven. But it is their conviction that the ones they execute should go to hell. And this is the rationale for the rape they allow their guards to commit upon women prisoners before they are killed.

As explained above, in “*Reading Lolita in Tehran*”, there we read an alarming episode in which virgin girls are executed by prison guards after being raped. This is done by soldiers of the protectors of Islam in Tehran. It is a puzzle when we see a ‘pious’ religious army commits rape and then kills the victim.

*There was one girl there – her only sin had been her amazing beauty. They brought her in on some trumped-up immorality charge. They kept her for over a month and repeatedly raped her. They passed her from one guard to another. That story got around jail very fast, because the girl wasn't even political; she wasn't with the political prisoners. They married the virgins off to the guards, who would later execute them. The philosophy behind this act was that if they were killed as virgins, they would go to heaven. You talk of betrayals. Mostly they forced those who had "converted" to Islam to empty the last round into the heads of their comrades as tokens of their new loyalty to the regime. If I were not privileged, she said with rancor, if I were not 'blessed' with a father who shared their faith, God knows where I would be now – in with the other molested virgins or with those who put a gun to someone's head to prove their loyalty to Islam. (p. 214)*

Based on the above quote, we can easily understand that beauty alone can endanger woman's life if need arises to molest or sexually abuse any [female] victim. We herein learn that the daughter of a person whose faith is the same as that of the government people secures mercy from the guards while the daughters of others citizens suffer to the extent of extra judicial killings, after being sexually abused and raped. This is an atrocity expressed in "*Reading Lolita in Tehran*" during and after the great revolution of the 1978/79 Iranian revolution. This is the injustice done to women of Iran by people loyal to the regime.

#### **4.1.3 Lack of Equal Opportunities for Men and Women**

Actually, lack of equal opportunities is very akin to the issue discussed under 4.2.1 here above that raises the injustices done to women in Arab/Islamic countries. But by citing some ideas with this regard from other studies, let us corroborate the facts as reconstructed in the novels.

In most Islamic/Arab countries, we learn from studies that there is lack of opportunity to elect their leaders. This is true to both men and women. But even if there is a chance to such suffrage, in most cases the women are deprived of this opportunity. Ottawa explains this more:

Arab countries severely curtail the political rights of all their citizens, men and women. Even when recognized on paper, they are rarely respected in practice. Here, I am only discussing the formal political rights of women. Only three Arab countries do not recognize the right of women to vote and to stand for elections. Two of the three states, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), do not hold elections in the first place, leaving Kuwait as the only country that holds regular elections but excludes women. (op.cit : 4)

Citing some other important scholarly figures, Mojab says the following with respect to the right of women in jurisdiction in Islamic countries, especially of Iran:

According to a study of the law by lawyer Kar (1997), women can engage in judicial duties only in the limited sphere of qazi-ye tahqiq (research judge), can work under the supervision of the all-male heads of the courts (ra'is-e dahgat), but cannot have access to higher judicial positions such as *hakim*, judge (*dadres*) and head of the court (Kar, 1997). In short, Kar demonstrates that the 1982 law has

explicitly stipulated that 'judges should be selected from among qualified men . . .'; the 1995 Single Article does not change the clerics' view on women and judging; it assigns women, within the judiciary, to a special position called qazi-ye tahqiq, which under no conditions gives women any opportunity of access to a higher judicial position (Kar, 1997: 20). Women are, thus, denied the right to pass a verdict (Sodur-e hokum). (ibid, Accessed: 07/03/2012 04:18)

This reality of depriving women of their right to be judges at any level of the legal system is indirectly depicted in “*A Thousand Splendid Suns*,” when a jury of all men of Talibs sits to ‘examine’ and pass the final verdict to the case of Mariam. The young man says, “Our brains are different. You are not able to think like we can. . . . This is why we require only one man witness but two female ones.” From this devastating speech of the young Taliban, we can deduce that women are not allowed to be witnesses, leave alone judges. On top of this, we simultaneously observe here that women’s cases in courts do not get due attention and proper care. (p. 355) and “*Woman at Point Zero*” (p.101 }

In “*Woman at Point Zero*,” the major female character, Firdaus, is a graduate of secondary school with high scores which could enable her to get hired with a high amount of salary had she been a man. But due to the fact that she is a woman, she never secures such an opportunity and on the contrary she becomes a prostitute, though later, after one of her clients, namely Da’ia, in her life of prostitution, tells her that that job is not respected. Because of this sarcastic comment she finds a small job with a small salary but abandons this as well due to another romantic setback that changes her mind to go to her previous sex work to get back her economic welfare.

A certain head of state out of Egypt hears the fame of Firdaus that she has become a very successful prostitute who has been able to grab the attention of wealthy people and influential politicians. Along with various attractive presents and a big sum of money, he sends her a message to come to his place of residence for the purpose of his personal affair. But she refuses to accept his offers of any kind. He sends the policemen to threaten her, still she refuses. As her refusal continues, his intimidation and frustration keeps on growing as well. This big man abuses his power and the resource of his country for the sake of getting one prostitute in an unjust way. She says the following:

*My refusal made him even more intent on gaining a victory over me. Every day he would send me a man from the police, and each time this man would try a different approach. . . . I refused to go to men of this sort. My body was my property alone, but the land of our country was theirs to own. On one occasion they put me in prison because I turned down one of these important men. So I hired a very big lawyer, for a very big sum of money. Shortly after, I was released from gaol without charges. The court decided I was honorable woman. Now I had learnt that honor required large sums of money to protect it, but that large sums of money could not be obtained without losing one’s honor. An infernal circle whirling round and round, dragging me up and down with it.*

*. . . I knew that my profession had been invented by men, and that men were in control of both our worlds, the one on earth, and the one in heaven. That men force to sell their bodies at a price, and that the lowest paid body is that of a wife....(p. 99)*

From the grievance of Firdaus, we learn that there is no justice among men towards women. This is depicted by the head of state mentioned in the novel above when he unashamedly sends the police to bring her to his bed and know this by her words when she expresses that women's worlds are controlled by men on earth as well as beyond after death. This idea of Firdaus indirectly shows that religious scriptures are written by men in favor of men themselves. By the same token, the author conveys the message that women's fate is decided by men: and that is one kind of injustice when we see it from the point of view of feminism.

In "*Reading Lolita in Tehran*", we observe great injustices as we have tried to see earlier here above. Though in Islamic countries all people encounter communal problems by the regimes, women's fate is believed to be the worst, we come to know this even from what the novels show in the lives of their female characters. Let us look at the following excerpt from the novel while the author, Nafisi, narrates directly to the reader about what life looks like in the Islamic Republic of Iran especially with respect to females; the names she mentions are women students of her literature class and what she calls 'the blind censor' is a person assigned by the regime to censor all audio and video literary works of the Islamic Republic. On the other hand, this incidence shows how the regime disregards the work of literature.

*When I am asked about life in the Islamic republic of Iran, I cannot separate the most personal and private aspects of our existence from the gaze of the blind censor. I think of my girls, who came from very different backgrounds. Their dilemmas, regardless of their background, were shared, and stemmed from the confiscation of their most intimate moments and private aspirations by the regime. This conflict lay at the heart of the paradox created by the Islamic rule. Now that the mullahs ruled the land, religion was used as an instrument of power, an ideology. It was this ideological approach to faith that differentiated those in power from millions of ordinary citizens, believers like Mahshid, Manna, and Yassi, who found the Islamic Republic their worst enemy. People like me hated the oppression, but these others had to deal with the betrayal. Yet even for them, the contradictions and inhibitions in their personal lives involved them more directly than the great matters of war and revolution. (p.273)*

It is the regime's breaching of personal rights and curtailing of aspirations of its citizens that made the author express the above grievance. According to this memoir, females in Iran are deprived of their job for the simple reason that they do not want to wear the burqa or the veil while men can wear as they need on condition that they don't follow the western style of wearing such as neckties which, according to the regime, show immorality and decadence. To this end, in Tehran, there was a so called 'Morality Committee' whose sole responsibility was patrolling the towns and arrest 'immoral' citizens who do not obey the clothing codes and application of cosmetics. Especially females were arrested if they happen to show even a strand of their hair or part of their body, wherever it is found. (p. 275)

In "*A Thousand Splendid Suns*", as in many of Islamic nations, the rules and regulations tend to side men. This can be proved by the fact that the government people turned Mariam and

Laila when they were trying to escape from the suffering of their husband, Rasheed, and go to Pakistan for relief. They caught them while trying to go through a checkpoint in a truck and after beating them for their attempt to abandon their husband and for their breaching the rule of that they should be accompanied by a male relative or husband when going out of their house, the police give them back to Rasheed, even without giving him any warning not to beat or get angry with them, and the suffering gets exacerbated due to their trial to betray him. (pp. 251 and following)

Let us have a look at the following quote to understand how a husband frightens his wife (wives) if he wants to do so and that there is seemingly no one to protect them from men's chauvinistic wrath. This warning of Rasheed in "A Thousand Splendid Suns" is uttered after the two women are back to his home by the guards of the checkpoint when trying to escape to Peshawar, Pakistan.

*"You try this again and I will find you. I swear on the Prophet's name that I will find. And, when I do, there isn't a court in this godforsaken country that will hold me accountable for that I will do. To Mariam first, then to her, and you last. I will make you watch. You understand me? I will make you watch."*

*And, with that, he left the room. But not before delivering a kick to the flank that would have Laila pissing blood for days. (p.265)*

Relatively, women are said to have had golden age during the era of communists under Najibullah. But after the fall of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan in 1992, the new Mujahideen leaders made things worse and shifted to *Shari'a* that, according to many studies, disfavors women and deprives of their equal opportunities with the male counterparts. Let us see the following:

*The freedoms and opportunities that women had enjoyed between 1978 and 1992 were a thing of the past now. Laila could still remember Babi[her father] saying of those years of communist rule, **It is a good time to a woman in Afghanistan, Laila.** Since the Mujahideen take-over in April 1992, Afghanistan's name had been changed to the Islamic State of Afghanistan. The Supreme Court under Rabbani was filled now with hardliner mullahs who did away with the communist-era decrees that empowered women and instead passed rulings based on *Shari'a*, strict Islamic laws that ordered women to cover, forbade their travel without a male relative, punished adultery with stoning. Even if the actual enforcement of these laws was sporadic at best. But they would enforce us more, Laila had said to Mariam, if they were not so busy killing each other. And us. (pp. 253-254)*

#### **4.1.4 Women as Items of Commodity**

In "Woman at Point Zero", we get the following story that breaks the selling of Firdaus, the major character about whom the novel is written, to an old man, namely Sheik Mahmoud. Firdaus lives with her uncle after her parents are dead consecutively. Her uncle makes her join one of boarding schools for girls. But as she gets older, the wife of her uncle proposes to her husband that

Firdaus should be married off to an old man, a retiree whose wife died the previous year. After Firdaus completes grade 12, her sister-in-law, the wife of her uncle, plots to get rid of her from their home. At this point of time, her uncle and his wife discuss as to where to send Firdaus for she is staying idle and fear she would be a burden; it is also possible to suspect that this wife could be afraid of Firdaus not to snatch her husband if she stays longer at their home. It is in their discussion that the wife mentions the idea of marrying Firdaus off to the wife's uncle. Firdaus listens to this conspiracy of the wife in their bedroom.

*"Your holiness, I have a wonderful idea."*

*"What is it?"*

*"My uncle, Sheikh Mahmoud, is a virtuous man. He has a big pension and no children, and he's been on his own since his wife died last year. If he marries Firdaus she will have a good life with him, and he can find in her an obedient wife, who will serve him and relieve his holiness. ..."*

*"I agree with you but Sheikh Mahmoud is too old for her.... [And do] not forget you the very obvious deformity he has on his face."*

*'Deformity? Who says it's a deformity? Besides, your holiness, as the saying goes, "nothing shames a man but an empty pocket." (p.37-38)*

After arguing for some time, the husband and wife agree to ask the old man, maybe out of the social norm of engagement that we see here a female's family submitting a proposal to a man to marry their daughter, to have the hands of their Firdaus without even asking her willingness.

This happens for two explicit reasons.

- 1) to get rid of her from their house for, according to the wife, "she eats twice as much as any of [their] children." (p.36)
- 2) to quench the financial thirst of the wife with the 100 pounds or more she expects from the Sheikh as dowry if he agrees upon her proposal.

*'If he pays a hundred pounds, then Allah will indeed have been generous to us, and I wouldn't be so greedy as to ask for more.'...*

*'If he accepts to pay one hundred pounds that will be sufficient blessing from Allah. I will be able to pay my debt and buy some underwear, as well as a dress or two for Firdaus.... (p.39)*

In this fashion, the wife and her husband literally sell off Firdaus in the name of marriage for another suffering, which is awaiting her out of the house of her uncle. The Sheikh takes her to his house; she begins her life as a wife to a man of over 40 years her senior. A man who suffers from facial deformity; a deformity that oozes bad smell, a smell Firdaus is forced to challenge in time of kissing while making love, if we can call it love making.

*He was already over sixty, whereas I hadn't yet turned nineteen. On his chin, below the lip, was a large swelling, with a hole in the middle. Some days the hole would be dry, but on others it would turn into a rusty old tap exuding drops red in color like blood, or whitish yellow, like pus. (p. 44)*

In "A Thousand Splendid Suns", we get similar case between Mariam and Rasheed. Mariam goes to her father's house after her mother, Nana, dies of suicide. At her father's house, Mariam begins to lead tense life due to her background and the modern way of life her father's

family leads in Herat. This time around, in the same manner Firdaus' family did to Sheikh Mahmoud in *Wman at Point Zero*, likewise, Mariam's father proposes to marry his daughter off to a shoemaker in Kabul who was there during that time. This Rasheed is very old and Mariam doesn't know him at all leave alone loving him and giving any sort of approval to marry him. But the family forces her through coercive measures so that she leaves their house and thereby bury deep the cause of the shame of the family, for she is born out of marriage or *niqah*.

The three wives of Jalil and himself have gathered in the salon. Mariam is summoned to be informed that she is going to be given to a husband who, like Firdaus, is about 30 years of her senior, and as a matter of coincidence, like that of Firdaus, his wife is dead some ten years back. Both young female characters are made a solace to the bereaved husbands. This is of course fictional representation. But we can infer from this sordid fictional reality that the same thing could happen in these countries in real life. We understand that fiction is a mirror through which we can see our images. Let us see the following when Jalil is telling the news to Mariam, his daughter.

*"Well," Afsoon began. "I – that is, we – have brought you here because we have some very good news to give you."*

*Mariam looked up....*

*"You have a suitor," Khadija said.*

*Mariam's stomach fell. "A what?" she said through suddenly numb lips.*

*"A khastegar. A suitor. His name is Rasheed," Khadija went on. "He is a friend of a business acquaintance of your father's. He is a Pashtun, from Kandahar originally, but he lives in Kabul.... (p.46)*

Mariam refuses to accept their proposal. But it is in vain. Her father forces her to marry Rasheed. As a result of this forced marriage, the wives of Jalil succeed in avoiding the 'shame of the family' that Mariam is a child born out of wedlock and hence is said to be the *harami*, the curse of the family, the scandal Jalil wishes to be free of, though evidently he loves his daughter internally as we learn from developments later. Thanks to the mischievous design of those wives of him, now Mariam has gone to Kabul, 650 kilometers away from Herat, in the name of marriage and they have temporarily buried the cause of the 'shame' of the family. Like Firdaus, she is transferred from one site of suffering to another. The cause of her suffering is the tradition that labels children of a man born out of wedlock are *harami*, a curse to the family. But if a woman gets pregnant out of marriage, it is adultery and must be stoned to death.

#### **4.2 The Struggle of Female Characters in the Novels to Face Challenges**

As we have seen in the synopses of the novels, three of them vividly depict what women's life looks like in Islamic countries such as the ones about which the novels are written within the time frame the settings cover. Under this subtitle, we shall examine how female characters of these novels try to defend themselves from the challenges they face from the patriarchal system plainly observed in the reading.

In *"Woman at Point Zero"*, the major character, Firdaus, encounters various challenges from her childhood to the time of her self-realization. She is sexually abused by her uncle and others that follow in her journey to adulthood. She tries her level best to face off the challenges life

poses. When she becomes unable to continue her first marriage with a deformed person, who is above 40 years her senior, she escapes to nowhere with the main objective of emerging out of hellish life forcibly imposed upon her by her own uncle and his wife. She then gets someone named Bayoumi, a man who works in a coffee house, and he takes her to his home. She faces another sexual attack there. She escapes this also and joins prostitution with the help of one senior prostitute named Sharifa. She goes on working as prostitute until the time she faces a two word phrase, viz. *Not Respected*, a phrase that breaks upon her prostitution is not a respected job, from one of her clients. She finds a job and joins certain company to avoid the psychological torture she encountered from those words. She loves someone there, Ibrahim, who seemed to her progressive and a man of principles as he was the cadre of the organization she works for. But he betrays her and marries the daughter of his boss. Firdaus again turns to her former sex work in desperation of what she faced from Ibrahim. Due to this phenomenon of Ibrahim's switching his interest from poor Firdaus to the rich man's daughter, she comes to realize that success could come through disrespectful job as well, and she becomes rich out of prostitution. But when she begins to earn much money, a certain pimp, namely Marzouk, comes to her life. He asks her to be under his control and share the money she gets. She refuses. She tries in many ways to come out of this trouble. Finally, cognizant of the fact that the system is in favor of men, she takes her own measure and snatching his own knife which he was using to intimidate her up until then, she stabs him to death. After killing the pimp, she goes to the police and tells them that she has killed a criminal. The system she abhors puts her in jail and without proper legal provisions and counseling, she is at the end executed. In this manner, she serves justice for herself by killing the person by whom she was wronged, though she finally loses her life, with pleasure, in fact. She preferred death to life instead of leading an atrocious living under stress and injustices imposed upon her by the patriarchal system she has labeled as totally obnoxious.

In "*A Thousand Splendid Suns*", there are two main female characters whose fate is tied up together by mere social and political coincidences. They are Mariam from Heart province, some 650 kilometers from the capital, Kabul and Laila in Kabul. Mariam is a daughter of a rich person named Jalil. She was called *harami* by her mother and family for she was born out of wedlock. Her father was ashamed of her and therefore he used to support her from afar, living with her mother, NaNa, in a *Kolb*, some two kilometers from his house. This incident of her being *harami* (which means illegitimate, unholy and cursed in Arabic as well as in Amharic too, <□□□>) was not clear to her; she comes to know this later when she gets older as she asked why her father is not willing to take her with him and raise her with other children of her father born from three of his wives.

One day she accidentally goes to her father's house without telling her mother, Nana. She couldn't be welcomed by her father and was forced indirectly to go back to her mother, without even seeing her at the gate. But when she gets back, she found her mother dead by hanging herself thinking that she had deserted and left her alone. Hearing this situation, her father takes her to his home and to get rid of the shame he quickly arranges forced marriage to a shoemaker who lives in Kabul and marries her off to this person immediately.

In Kabul, Mariam faces serious obstacles from both her husband and nature. She couldn't have him children even though attempts have taken place for about eight times. She frequently miscarries. While living with her husband, Rasheed, there a fight arises in Afghanistan between the old regime of communists and factions of the Mujahideens. The fight gets fiercer from time to time and edges towards Kabul. During this critical time, a rocket hits the house of a teacher and kills all but his daughter in the family. This little girl of the teacher, Laila, is rescued by Mariam's husband from the rubble and gets custody in his home. As time goes, Rasheed takes advantage of the presence of Laila in his house and forces her to marry as his second wife.

Life becomes bitter for both women in Rasheed's house. These two women begin to confide in each other and intend to escape to Pakistan. But they are caught and returned to Rasheed. After their return, the harsh treatment becomes their daily experience. In the mean time, the lover of Laila, when she was in her teens, and who was said to have gone to Pakistan as a refugee, comes to Kabul and visits his Laila from whom he had a daughter, Aziza, conceived on the day they separated years back before he escaped from Kabul with his family.

The appearance of Tariq, Laila's lover, at the house of Rasheed becomes the major cause of turmoil in the family. Rasheed always beats Laila and Mariam. One day, he decidedly wanted to kill them. But Mariam precariously takes the first step and kills this man. After killing him, she tells Laila and Tariq to escape the scene of the killing lest they would be arrested and be executed. Instead, she courageously goes to the police, like Firdaus in *'Woman at Point Zero'*, and surrenders confessing that she has killed a man who has been the cause of her suffering through out her life. She tells people that she never regrets the killing and believes she has served justice truly. Like Firdaus, she gets executed by the Taliban without due process of trial.

The story of both Firdaus of "*Woman at Point Zero*" and Mariam of "*A Thousand Splendid Suns*" is very similar. They face problems but no one comes to give them solution. As their problems press them to the extent of depriving their dignity and even the least human rights, they take their own measures and kill their enemies. After they kill, the law doesn't give them any opportunity to protect themselves and with an outright verdict of sham trial, they get executed. They never get any right for self defense or a right to have a lawyer. No legal entity or any party for that matter seems to take care of these poor fellows to examine how and why they killed men. But what we learn from their seemingly deviant actions is that they are happy in doing what they did and they are also happy to accept the death sentence. It is possible to conclude here that they prefer dying instead of living in the society they label as corrupt and unfair especially to women like them. We don't see any interest for life in them. For example, Firdaus was repeatedly asked to write petition to the president of the country to get pardon from the death sentence. But she never wanted to do so, for she is fed up of the injustice she has been suffering throughout her life. She has believed that the only thing through which she gets her absolute freedom is death; and that death is surprisingly the result of the justice system she believed in and acted upon accordingly by taking her own measure in killing a 'criminal' who was considered as an 'innocent' man in the system she abhors and labels as unjust.

In "*Reading Lolita in Tehran*", we read the story of people in the Islamic Republic of Iran in general and that of women in particular. As it is mentioned earlier, this novel is a memoir. Azar Nafisi, the author of the book, is the one who narrates throughout. In this book, we get different anecdotes of different people especially the seven female students of Nafisi's informal literature class.

The aim of this literature class is to forget their frustration, to have a kind of vent for the release of the emotional stress these women are encountering from the regime. As it is explained here above in the discussion, in the Islamic Republic of Iran, during and after the revolution that took place in 1979, the population at large was deprived of many rights when compared with the former regime of the Shah. The young generation was forbidden not to watch films and read books that come from the west. The new revolutionaries were generally anti-west in every action they took. When it comes to women, they had a similar stand with the Taliban of the 90s in Afghanistan in that they both are adherents of Islamic law which favors the enforcement of *Shari'a*. After the revolution, as it is mentioned earlier herein, the new regime started to sack women from important offices such as from the judiciary. They were no more allowed to be judges. It was around this time that women intellectuals like Azar Nafisi herself began to worry about the fate of human rights in general and that of women in particular in that country. For example, Nafisi herself was

one of the victims. Prior to her coming to Iran, she had been living in the west, permanently in the USA. She had a taste of what democracy meant and everything in Tehran became meaningless to her when she compares the life style she led in the US. Professionally, she is an enlightened woman with doctorate degree in literature. She is a university lecturer. She came to Iran to contribute what she could in the new regime. But to whatever extent she exerted her efforts in her field of profession, due to the Islamic law imposed after the revolution she fails to succeed according to her ambitions. She faces challenges that come from the west-phobic students in her literature classes. She faces challenges that come from the regime in the form of restrictions such as lack of freedom of movement without being accompanied by male family member such as her husband or brother, even to the nearby shops, an obligation to wear burqa or veil, and more others. She gets the sack from Tehran University due to her refusal to wear hijab. She joins other higher education institutions but her consistent refusal to wear the veils obstructs her stay there and finally forced her to stay home as housewife raising her two children with the single income of her husband. It was in this time of her frustration that she plans to conduct secretive literature class at her home to forget the psychological pains tormenting her and some other women compatriots she confides to. To carry out her plan, she selected seven of her committed female students and invited them to attend the class. On Thursdays, for two years until she goes back to the US, this group of eight continued that class. In that class, they discussed western literary books and novels. In addition, that class was the means to express themselves and forget the regime for a while until the time they get out of the room they conduct the literature class. The class was their place of temporary freedom; freedom of speech, freedom of wearing their choice of clothing, wearing earrings, cosmetics, etc. When they go out of that class they obey the Islamic rules. In this fashion, they tried to get some sort of psychological relief from the stress imposed upon them by the regime.

#### **4.3 The Influence of Culture, Patriarchy, and Religion on Women's Status in Islamic Societies as Reflected in these Novels**

A US nuclear physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer is mentioned for his best quote with respect to the role of religion in stunting changes; he says: "In the most primitive societies... the principal function of ritual, religion, of culture as it is practiced is, in fact, almost to stop change...The principal function of the most vital and living traditions today is precisely to provide the instruments of rapid change."(Microsoft Encarta, 2009 ed., quotes on culture and religion).

From the Biblical times to the present, humans have been struggling against nature and against themselves. One society fights with another for some gains. One country fights with another in various times and for various reasons. In this course of societal relationships and contacts, the role of culture and religion is to be reckoned as vitally important. From the remotest Biblical time of the genesis up until now, so many changes have been made all over the world. However, like what Oppenheimer has said, it is possible to assume many a great changes might have been stifled or influenced by religion and culture due to the repulsive nature of both of them to entertain new ideas and attitudes rather than maintaining the old ones as creed. Let us have a look at, for example, the following quote from the Bible and realize how it has impacted the lives of women from time immemorial up to now.

*So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh.*

*Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman' for she was taken out of man." For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. (Book of Genesis chap.2: vs. 21-24)*

We can presume that this idea of the Bible, to whatever degree it is true or not, has defined the fate of women in culture that they are made of man's rib and by extension that they are second in creation next to man and hence are subsets of man in that they are a flint thereof. Citing the views of some historically and religiously known figures, Simone de Beauvoir reiterates the notion religious books such as the Bible have influenced people to accept the status of women as lower in nature than men. She says, "the female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities," said Aristotle; 'we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness.' And St Thomas for his part pronounced woman to be an 'imperfect man', an 'incidental' being. This is symbolized in Genesis where Eve is depicted as made from what Bossuet called 'a supernumerary bone' of Adam."

In actual fact, we do not or should not deny the fact that women and men are different in some major aspects of nature; in the first place they are anatomically different in that they are male and female. Apart from that as Mary Wollstonecraft admits, men and women are different in strength endowed by nature though difference in strength can by no means be a cause or justification to differ in being less or more beneficiary of human rights (vide supra under chapter 2 :1). Instead, as we have seen earlier, we can say that what has been significantly influencing the relation between man and woman could be attributed to mostly religious scriptures and people's interpretation and understanding thereof.

This is generally to mean religions and cultures have significant influence in defining the status of women in societies.

The same is true when we see the case of women in the Islamic world. To begin with, due to the similarity of both the Christian Bible and the Kuran, the societies of both religions believe that woman is second to man in creation and according to the scriptures they are there for the service of men, though there are other verses of instructions, needless to go deeper into the details, which warn men to treat their women justly. In this case, we can say that the patriarchal systems of both the Islamic and Christian societies base their religious rituals as the source of men's supremacy over women.

In light of the above, we can see visible trails of the aforementioned religious and cultural influence on the treatment of women in the novels we have been discussing.

In "*Woman at Point Zero*", and "*A Thousand Splendid suns*", the destiny of Firdaus and Mariam was formulated by the cultural and religious traits of their societies. Firdaus was grown up in a family where her mother was frequently beaten, insulted, ignored, and harassed by her father. The harsh treatments she observed in her family were also her fate when she married Sheikh Mahmoud. The culture in which Firdaus was raised was not kind to women; a kind of what is known as vicious circle was in place in her life from childhood to adulthood. The marriage made between her and the Sheikh was unfair mainly in terms of age difference, lack of her willingness,

and the deformity of the man. On top of that, she was frequently beaten and mistreated. For that suffering, she couldn't get any legal protection, and no law was in place to defend her from the ill-treatments she was facing. With this respect, the patriarchal system seems ignorant of the suffering of women in the name of marriage. It gives priority to the needs and interests of men. Men on the other hand exploit this gap and cause women to suffer a lot. This is manifested in the novels especially by Sheikh Mahmoud, being a Sheikh he is not restrained by the religious knowledge he has accumulated for so long, and by Rasheed who marries two underage girls, Mariam and Laila, and never gives equal love and treatment to both, which is against the Kuran. In this connection, we can say that the influence of the religion is barely visible in these men; they rather go astray from what the religious scriptures say. This mere fact by itself is indicative of men's optional obedience of religious instructions in that if commandments are useful to them they obey, if not, they disobey without any need to reckon the punishments prescribed against the breach of each commandment. Therefore, it is possible to comment here that there is much to be done especially among religious leaders including sheikhs and priests. With regard to people of preferential nature like the husbands of Firdaus and Mariam, they all should keep in mind this Amharic saying: “በቆይ ቆይቶ በቆይቶ በቆይቶ “which literally means “using a spoon when the food is hot, and fingers when it is cold [is not advisable].” It is poetically to mean that we don't have to be opportunists in such a way that we love two [contradictory] things at a time; we have to choose either of them or none.

The same is true with Mariam of “*A Thousand Splendid Suns*”. Mariam suffers a lot in not lesser a degree than Firdaus does in “*Woman at Point Zero*”. She is married off to her unequal at the age of fifteen. Her husband, Rasheed takes her to Kabul and mistreats her with no apparent reason in the absence of anyone who claims even her ‘soul’, and yet for the reason she shouldn't be accountable to, such as her incapacity to bear him a baby due to natural causes. ...

In both these novels, the women seem to willy nilly accept what their religion and culture along with their men impose upon them. To whichever direction they stare at for any sort of solution, they get none. But when they come to realize that everything is hopelessly out of their control, they decide to challenge the difficulty they are facing with their maximum capacity and as a result they kill their enemies as a last resort and get executed as a consequence after sham prosecutions by their respective male dominated legal systems. Though killing is abominable and must not be supported in any respect and at any cost, the reader of these novels can't help saying, “Well, these women have killed cruelty, not as such individuals. Hence, their actions should be considered as neither right nor wrong.”

In “*Reading Lolita in Tehran*”, the same story is manifested, though there is no killing as a solution among characters; in this book we get more of intellectual debate and reports of citizens' suffering during or after the revolution and in the time of Iran-Iraq war which took place between 1980 and 1988. The root cause of all the suffering Nafisi and her female students face is more of cultural and religious than personal behaviors like the beating of husbands at home. It is the Islamic *Shari'a* that puts best intellectuals like Nafisi herself out of their respected jobs and exposes the nation to brain drain. It is due to the imposition of the *Shari'a* law that Dr Nafisi was forced to sit idly at her home confined to teach only seven female literature students in a narrow room for just pastime and stress relieving purposes while she could have lectured big classes of students or delivered a speech in big halls of conferences and symposia, as she has been doing until then and later after she left Iran. It is the imposition of *Shari'a* law in Afghanistan that had forbidden female students from attending schools and joining the workforce of the country.

Based on the discussion made here above, it is, therefore, safe to conclude that patriarchy, culture, and religion are the major dictators in either of the fictional world or in the real societal life that define and redefine the status of women. And hence, it is empirical for any society, especially the Islamic societies, to reconsider the situations pertaining to women some of which are mentioned in this paper.

With respect to the relationship between humankind in general and the religions followed hitherto, we can opine that humankind is both advantaged and disadvantaged by the introduction of religion into human life. Religion may be useful to restrain some traits of human characters if we strictly obey commandments, not in a pretentious way like Sheikh Mahmoud and Rasheed did, and on the other hand it may be disastrous if it is abused and under its cover people get involved in destructive activities in either misunderstanding of the religious instructions or due to overzealousness or to satisfy their skewed nature which is more prone to selfishness rather than communal interests. Let us see what Sam Harris in his *'End of Faith'* says next with this regard:

We have been slow to recognize the degree to which religious faith perpetuates man's inhumanity to man. This is not surprising, since many of us still believe that faith is an essential component of human life. Two myths now keep faith beyond the fray of rational criticism, and they seem to foster religious extremism and religious moderation equally: (1) most of us believe that there are good things that people get from religious faith (e.g., strong communities, ethical behavior, spiritual experience) that cannot be had elsewhere; (2) many of us also believe that the terrible things that are sometimes done in the name of religion are the products not of *faith* per se but of our baser natures—forces like greed, hatred, and fear—for which religious beliefs are themselves the best (or even the only) remedy. ( p.15)

On the other hand, another renowned personality, Richard Dawkins, in his *"The God Delusion"*, says that religious extremism is not confined to this or that religion; it rather is universal irrespective of time and place. Though he is an atheist who doesn't accept the presence of any god or God, he mentions what people do in blind obedience of their faith without having enough time to examine the dire consequence of what they do. Let us read the following:

In illustration of the dark side of absolutism, I mentioned the Christians in America who blow up abortion clinics, and the Taliban of Afghanistan, whose list of cruelties, especially to women, **I find too painful to recount**. I could have expanded upon Iran under the ayatollahs, or Saudi Arabia under the Saudi princes, **where women cannot drive**, and are **in trouble if they even leave their homes without a male relative (who may, as a generous concession, be a small male child)**.(op. cit., p.295, emphasis mine)

Finally, I would like to once more repeat and give an emphasis to what Taslima Nasreen has said to Rupert Murdoch's *The Times* newspaper, "Our religion doesn't give women any human dignity. Women are considered slaves...I write against the religion because if women want to live like human beings, they will have to live outside the religion and Islamic law."(op. cit.)

## **Chapter Five**

### **Findings, Recommendations, and Conclusion**

#### **5.1 Findings**

The following are the major findings of this paper:-

- a) In all the three novels analyzed in this thesis, women characters are subjected to untold suffering and rampant injustice imposed by the in-built social, cultural, and religious practices and gender related oppression;
- b) In all the three novels discrimination against females (women) is visibly seen in such a way that men are privileged in a degree more profoundly than women, especially in the areas of job opportunities, education, and inheritance.
- c) In all the novels government apparatuses are on the side of men ignoring the human and citizenship rights of women.
- d) In all the three novels there is a tendency that there is no body to protect women when the male dominated social and familial practices mistreat females in various ways such as beating them, flogging, selling them through unequal marriages to elder people, stoning to death due to so called adultery, and the like.
- e) In all the three novels unfair trial and extra judiciary killing of women by stoning or hanging or shooting is observed.

#### **5.2 Recommendations**

It is believed that the worrying conditions of women in these novels are also visible in reality on the ground in the countries mentioned in the thesis. Despite the fact that these conditions may be more or less serious here and there when compared to this or that specific country; nevertheless, the plight of women could be minimized to a great magnitude if the following recommendations are heeded by all concerned parties. As a matter of fact, albeit the focus of this paper is the situation of women in Islamic countries as reconstructed in those novels; however, it is quite recommendable to note the fact that the treatment of women in other countries and religions is also something to get due attention, for similar mistreatments are manifested in other different versions.

The following recommendations are formulated after analyzing the chronically acute problems of women in the novels discussed.

- a) Countries should revise their constitutional laws and religious codes in accordance with the demands of the human consciousness of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- b) Countries should abide by the international conventions such as that of the Geneva Convention and other similar treatises which stand for the equal rights of men and women. Moreover, countries and organizations should avoid double standards when it comes to the preservation of civil rights and humanity at large.
- c) Citizens of countries where there is gender inequality, male chauvinism, and discrimination against sexes should get due education and gender related awareness to fill the gap with respect to old perceptions and traditional beliefs in the minds of both men and women.
- d) Religious leaders should use their amenable acceptance among the society and strive to correct what has been out of control up to now especially with regard to the equality of all human beings before God or any deity for that matter so that harmonious social relationship and peaceful co-existence between men and women would reign forever.
- e) Governments, NGOs, and all other state and public institutions should work hard in an effort to empower women in various walks of life, like, for example, the new French President, Francois Hollande, has vowed and is currently doing his level best to make his Council of Ministers consist of 50% women candidates.

### 5.3 Conclusion

Anything started has an end; now here we are in the conclusion, jet lagged and may be teemed with some astonishment about women's life in 'some' Islamic countries, after reading or at least skimming over this thesis under the title, '*Comparative Analysis on the Portrayal of Women Characters in Three Prominent Novels from the Islamic World*'.

In this paper we have tried to briefly survey the condition of women in Islamic/Arab countries as reconstructed in three novels, namely, the Egyptian female writer and feminist Nawal El Saadawi's "*Woman at Point Zero*", the US-Afghan male feminist writer and activist Khaled Hosseini's "*A Thousand Splendid Suns*", and the Iranian female feminist writer Azar Nafisi's "*Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*". Two female writers and one man; professionally, Saadawi and Hosseini are medical doctors with special interest, inclination and dedication to literature while Nafisi is a doctor in (English) literature.

In all the three novels, we learned that their women characters fight the fight which is above their capacity. In these novels, we understand the fact that the patriarchal system which is predominant almost all over the world is severely dominant in those Islamic nations mentioned in the novels. Within the time setting of the novels, we understand that women are considered as commodities that can be spared anytime by their husbands or macho men with whom they happen to share a thread of life for this or that reason. In these novels, we learn that being a female in Islamic countries is really unlucky, though some among Islamist feminists try to say the opposite.

Finally, it is recommendable to those countries where there is a tendency of Islamic fundamentalism and the people within to reconsider the condition of women's plight currently prevalent in countries such as Saudi, Iran, and Afghanistan. It is not a matter of being westernized or proponent of the so called western democracy; but if we take it seriously it is highly dismaying, for example, if we hear of the fact that females are flogged or imprisoned for their refusal to disobey Islamic wearing or breach the ban that forbids women to drive a car. In this age of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it should be shame for human beings to kill a woman by stoning for the simple reason that she answered the call of nature with someone, while that someone is let free because he is a man, not a woman. This fact can be verified by googling the case of Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani, 43, an Iranian woman, and a mother of two children, whose death was commuted from stoning to hanging in recent times. Even that was possible as a result of international hue and cry, though the crying was for total pardon, not for that kind of commutation; I was one among the petitioners who signed a form through the internet, to save her from the unfair death sentence passed by the *Shari'a* judges for the alleged adultery she was accused of and admitted that it was done under duress out of her willing. (cf. [www.thedailybeast.com](http://www.thedailybeast.com))

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## DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, declare that this thesis is my work and that all sources of materials used for this thesis have been duly acknowledged.

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