

Feminist Theory Analysis of Nawal El Saadawi on the Function of Marriage from a Quranic Perspective

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Abstract:

For over a century, one of the most controversial issues in the Islamic world has been the "status" of women. Islamic feminism, which is based on the foundations of Western feminism, aims to improve the position of women and demonstrate the equality of rights between men and women in Islam by utilizing religious teachings. Islamic feminists believe that achieving this goal requires a change in the perception of Muslims regarding women's status. One of the most prominent activists of this intellectual movement is the Egyptian "Nawal El Saadawi," who, in the 1970s, rose to defend women's rights and attempted to challenge the functions of marriage based on Islamic culture and tradition. Therefore, this researcher aims to examine and analyze her views with reference to Quranic and prophetic teachings. To achieve this, library research methods have been employed for data collection, and descriptive and analytical methods have been used for processing the findings. The research reveals that Nawal El Saadawi's theory regarding the function of marriage, from the Quranic perspective, is weak, superficial, and imposed. Furthermore, serious errors are found in her theories.

Keywords: Islamic feminism, Nawal El Saadawi's theory, traditional marriage, traditional functions of marriage, Quran

Introduction

Nawal El Saadawi, an Egyptian doctor and researcher, is one of the founders of feminism in Islamic countries and one of the most significant activists defending women's rights. She was born in 1930 in Cairo and completed her medical degree in 1955 at Cairo University, followed by a master's degree in 1965 at Columbia University in the United States. She also pursued psychology studies at Ain Shams University in Cairo. Nawal was fluent in both French and English. Some of her most important works include *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* (1965), *Women and Sex* (1972), *Woman at Point Zero* (1974), and *Man and Sex* (1976). El Saadawi's works draw heavily on modern issues in psychology and sexuality. Most of her books, stories, and writings revolve around women's freedom and calls for equality with men in all areas (Helmi Amir, 2011: 1). Nawal was filled with enthusiasm and belief in change, not seeing human liberation as unattainable within political ideologies and movements. She criticized all prevailing religions and ideologies, from Islam, Christianity, and Judaism to Marxism and liberalism (Eftekhari, 2011: 34). Nawal El Saadawi had a keen and inquisitive perspective; she wrote boldly and freely, using humor to mock male power structures and exposing the inherent weaknesses in what is often regarded as superiority (Eftekhari, 2011: 33). Nawal El Saadawi was the first feminist to advocate for social reform in Egypt and the first expert in the women's movement following Tahtawi and Qasim Amin (Al-Ubaidi, 2009: 5). She stated, "I believe that paternal lineage is unjust because it ignores the mother's role in raising children and mothering" (El Saadawi, 2006: 2). Nawal sought to transform the image of women from one of humiliation and oppression to a rebellious figure who challenges societal structures. In her

view, true freedom cannot be achieved without liberation from all forms of exploitation—whether economic, political, sexual, or cultural (El Saadawi, 1980: 41).

Among El Saadawi's critiques, which align with the feminist manifesto, are the functions of the institution of marriage according to Islamic culture and tradition. In her opinion, three main critiques apply here. First, she argues that the institution of marriage, as a contract, paves the way for the violation of women. Her second critique is that the marriage contract subjects women to unconditional subjugation to men. Her third critique is that marriage is viewed as a relationship of ownership and possession.

In light of the above points, the question arises: How do Nawal El Saadawi's critiques of marriage function from a Quranic perspective? In other words, is the institution of marriage, based on Islamic culture and tradition, really a means of domination, control, and ownership of women by men?

This question is explored using descriptive-analytical methods across three separate discussions.

1- Nawal El Saadawi's View on Marriage as a Sexual and Economic Contract, and Its Critique

In this section, Nawal El Saadawi's perspective will be examined and critiqued. First, her view will be presented, followed by an analysis of its shortcomings.

1-1. Marriage as a Sexual and Economic Contract

According to Saadawi, marriage facilitates men's violation of women's sexual and financial rights (Saadawi, 1990: 423). She perceives marriage and the family as the primary institution where the subjugation of women begins.

1-2. Critique of Nawal El Saadawi's View

Saadawi believes that marriage is merely a sexual and economic contract. However, from the perspective of Islam, marriage is not viewed in such a simplistic manner. Rather, it is a contract based on kindness, affection, intimacy, and love, and it is entered into with the mutual consent of both parties. According to Islamic jurists, marriage is not valid unless both parties willingly agree to it. While it is true that marriage allows couples to fulfill their sexual needs within the boundaries of Sharia and law, it also imposes responsibilities on both parties. Examples of these responsibilities include good companionship, financial support (Nafaqa), mutual respect, child-rearing, and ensuring the well-being of their children. If marriage were solely for the purpose of fulfilling sexual desires, it would not entail such responsibilities. Marriage and family formation are rooted in the idea that men and women are incomplete without each other unless they seek each other out, unite, and support one another. These two elements, man and woman, complement each other. It is not merely physical relationships that complete them, nor is it only the birth of children that brings them joy, or material and superficial matters that attract them to one another. There is a subtle point here: it involves both a spiritual and a physical need. The Creator has designed the nature of living beings in this way. According to the Quran, human beings are fundamentally created in pairs. No man or woman exists without a counterpart. In their natural state, they seek out their partner and complete each other. The Quranic logic on this matter is as follows: "And We created you in pairs" (An-Naba:8). Another verse states: "And Allah created you from dust, then from a drop of sperm, then made you into pairs" (Fatir: 11). "The Originator of the heavens and the earth; He made for you mates from among yourselves, and for the cattle mates: by this means does He multiply you: there is nothing like Him, and He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing" (Ash-Shura: 11). Through such expressions, the Quran points to the fundamental philosophy behind the formation of the family. If pair formation were not ingrained in human nature, and if spouses were not a source of comfort for one another, and if love and mercy were not placed between them, there would be no need to dissolve one's individuality and independence in the small collective unit of the family through the marriage contract and to bear all its associated consequences (Beheshti, *Family in the Quran*, 2009: 33). Every individual has the right to marry. The verses that speak of the creation and formation of pairs for humans indicate that this is an inherent right. In light of these verses, one can argue that the right to have a spouse is a natural right rooted in human nature.

Nevertheless, two other fundamental reasons can also be presented. First, in Islamic culture, marriage is regarded as a divine blessing. Second, marriage in Islam is purposeful. Both of these points will be discussed separately.

1- 2.- 1Encouragement for Marriage and Family Formation in the Quran

The Holy Quran encourages people to marry in several verses. Sometimes, marriage is mentioned in the Quran as a blessing bestowed upon humanity: "And Allah has made for you from your own selves mates and has made for you from your mates sons and grandchildren" (An-Nahl: 72). In this verse, Allah encourages marriage by introducing women, children, and lawful sustenance as blessings from Him. The Quran also presents marriage and family formation as signs of Allah's greatness, urging people to value these divine signs: "And among His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquility in them, and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed, in that are signs for a people who give thought" (Ar-Rum: 21). Thus, the Quran portrays marriage as a source of peace and mutual love between spouses and emphasizes its spiritual significance for those who reflect.

2-2-1.Purposefulness of Marriage in Islam

The purpose of marriage in Islam is to bring forth a righteous and virtuous generation, to prevent the mixing of lineages and illegitimate offspring, to honor women, and to shield them from being exploited by corrupt and immoral men. Additionally, marriage serves as a means to combat immorality, which is a sign of barbarism and lack of civilization and is the root cause of many social problems, conflicts, the spread of various diseases, and the destruction of humanity (Zuhili, 2011: 62). The spouse is the person who accompanies one throughout life, from the beginning until the end. Undoubtedly, no human being is devoid of the need for love, kindness, and affection from others. One of the primary reasons that drives a person toward marriage and family formation is the necessity of love, intimacy, emotional support, and cooperation from others. It can be said that the strongest factor in the continued growth and prosperity of a family is the love and affection that family members have for one another (Mesbah, 1998: 55).

In summary, it can be stated that the feminist movement, by attempting to eliminate gender-based restrictions, has contributed to the breakdown of the family structure. It has replaced love, mercy, and compassion with cold, lifeless relationships. In some societies, this has jeopardized the health of future generations, and roles as sacred as pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing are now viewed with disdain. Meanwhile, concepts like contractual marriage, surrogate motherhood, and free love have been promoted. These practices are seen as the easiest way to escape the bonds of marriage. In their view, the only purpose of cohabitation between men and women, without any responsibility on either side, is the fulfillment of sexual needs. The traditional model of marriage between men and women is ridiculed, while relationships between men and men or women and women are praised. Feminists argue that the foundation of the family is built on the oppression of women by men, and for this reason, a shared life between a man and a woman cannot be an ideal model. Although these slogans have energized some women and drawn them into the public sphere, over time, many of these women have lost their roles as wives and mothers, and their domestic contributions have been deemed insignificant.

In contrast, Islam places a strong emphasis on the continuation of the human race and the upbringing of moral, well-rounded individuals as a fundamental goal. To achieve this, Islam prohibits unlawful and promiscuous relationships between men and women and encourages all individuals to maintain purity and chastity. As such, Islam stresses the importance of marriage and family formation while forbidding unconditional sexual relationships. The recent ideas promoted under the banner of feminism seek to distance both men and women from their natural inclinations. It is clear that women, in particular, suffer the most under this approach, as it runs contrary to the natural order of creation. Instead of embracing their unique qualities, many women have abandoned the home to take on various social roles in an effort to prove their equality with men, leading to emotional deprivation both in the family and in society. This trend ultimately mocks the kindness and familial affection that women bring to the family unit. One of the

fundamental errors of feminist thought is its failure to recognize the inherent and unchangeable differences between men and women. Their call for "equality" has caused great harm to society, especially to women.

Therefore, the desire for companionship is embedded in human nature, fulfilling both physical and emotional needs. Men and women complement each other and are often willing to sacrifice their lives for one another. Marriage is one of the beautiful blessings of God and a divine sign, not merely a sexual and economic contract.

2.Nawal El Saadawi's View of Marriage as the Most Oppressive Law in the World, and Its CritiqueIn the second part of this research, Nawal El Saadawi's view will be presented and critiqued. First, her perspective will be explained, followed by a critical analysis.

1-2 .Nawal El Saadawi's Perspective on Marriage.

One of Nawal El Saadawi's criticisms of the institution of marriage is that she considers it to be oppressive. Saadawi believes that a woman should follow her own desires rather than conforming to reform, *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), or the balance between the absolute (revelation) and the relative (reality); otherwise, she will become a tool for oppressors. From her perspective, it seems that no absolute values exist; rather, small and large societies create religion, and all religions throughout history have colluded against women. To liberate women, Saadawi argues that religion must be removed from life (Abbasi, 2004: 13).

2-2. Critique of Nawal El Saadawi's Perspective.

Two major criticisms can be made regarding Saadawi's view of marriage as an oppressive institution:

1. The perception of an institution as fair or unfair (oppressive) is not related to individual desires or will but is based on rational and religious criteria (Inayatirad, 2012: 42). In other words, the good and evil of actions are determined by reason and religious law. For example, murder is an oppressive act, and the victim's consent or lack thereof has no bearing on whether the act is oppressive, as unjustified killing is condemned by both reason and religion. Therefore, from the perspective of reason and religious law, marriage is not only not oppressive but also justified.

2. The process of rule-making in Islamic jurisprudence, which is based on *ijtihad* and guided by the Qur'an and Sunnah, often benefits women. For instance, rulings related to dowry (Surah An-Nisa, Ayah 4), maintenance (Surah Al-Baqarah, Ayah 233), and domestic work (wages for housework) are all established in favor of women (Mirzaei, 2020: 65). As such, the marriage contract imposes significant economic and social responsibilities on the husband. Considering these points, it is difficult to argue that the institution of marriage is inherently oppressive or sets the stage for male dominance over women. Therefore, one might conclude that Saadawi's view has two possible interpretations: either she is unaware of the Islamic legal framework governing marriage or, despite her knowledge of Islamic rights, she opposes them due to her adherence to feminist ideology.

3-Nawal El Saadawi's View of Marriage as a Relationship of Ownership

In this section, Saadawi's view of marriage as a relationship of ownership is examined and critiqued. First, her perspective is analyzed, followed by a critique.

1-3Nawal El Saadawi's Perspective

Another one of Saadawi's criticisms is that marriage creates a relationship of ownership. She argues that the husband buys the wife from her family in exchange for a dowry, and that the marriage contract, in its earliest clauses, prescribes that the woman is the husband's property and must be entirely obedient to him. In her analysis of traditional and Islamic marriage, she replaces the titles used within the household with derogatory labels in order to challenge the societal view of men. The terms she uses include: husband as owner, wife as owned, and children as owned. According to her, what a woman possesses belongs to the man in the same way that a slave is owned by their master. Saadawi believes that true freedom can only be achieved by escaping all forms of exploitation, including economic, political, sexual, and cultural

(Saadawi, Nawal, 1980. **The Naked Face of the Arab Woman**, translated by Majid Forutan and Rahim Moradi, Andishehaye Novin Publishing, Tehran, 41). Raouf Ezzat also critiques Saadawi's statements, writing: "Dr. Saadawi's enmity with religion is evident, and she does not deny it" (Saadawi, 2003: 87 and n.d.: 118).

2-3 .Critique of Nawal El Saadawi's Perspective.

Saadawi's theory that a man buys a woman from her family by paying a dowry (Saadawi, 1990, 83-82) is open to criticism. In Islam, the concept of dowry and maintenance was established to ensure that a woman who works within the home is not seen as an unpaid laborer. It can be argued that the real philosophy behind dowry is a wise decision rooted in the natural order of creation, intended to foster better relations between men and women and strengthen their bond. A woman, through her natural instincts, understands that her dignity and respect lie in not entering into marriage freely without receiving something in return. Similarly, a man's need for a wife compels him to offer her a gift as a token of his respect (Fahimi, 2006: 142). The Qur'an considers this gift essential, and the natural human inclination toward fairness is carefully observed in Islamic teachings. A woman's role is to respond to a man's love, and this love is best reciprocated rather than initiated by the woman (Motahhari, 1995: 243) .

One could argue that the dowry in Islam is not a form of economic transaction but rather a gesture to honor the sanctity of marriage, respect the woman's character, and express sincerity and devotion to her. It also fosters harmony in marital life. The dowry is not the price of the woman, as in a sale; in fact, Islamic law does not require the dowry to be specified at the time of the marriage contract, unlike in sales, where the price must be determined or the contract is void. In marriage, if the dowry is not specified, the woman is still entitled to a fair dowry (Motahhari, 1995: 243). Some believe that the Qur'an's use of the term "sadaq" for dowry implies that the husband must offer it as a gift, not as a form of ownership over the woman. The word "sadaq" comes from the root meaning sincerity, symbolizing the husband's genuine love for the wife. "Nihla" (gift) in the Qur'an further emphasizes that the dowry is a gift, not a payment that gives the husband control over the wife (Zamakhshari, 1407, vol. 1: 469). Thus, dowry is a non-refundable gift, and in no way does it imply that the husband owns his wife .

The detailed regulations and responsibilities outlined in Islamic jurisprudence regarding marriage and family life are sufficient to address these criticisms. If Saadawi had studied these conditions and the guidance provided in Islamic texts, she might have critiqued her own understanding of marriage.

Conclusion

The following conclusions are derived from the discussions presented in this study:

1. Nawal El Saadawi, an Egyptian doctor and researcher, is one of the founders of feminism in Islamic countries and one of the most prominent activists defending women's rights. This Egyptian scholar offers three primary criticisms of the institution of marriage based on Islamic tradition. First, she argues that marriage functions as a contract that facilitates the oppression of women. Second, she claims that the marriage contract leads to the unconditional submission of women to men. Third, she believes that marriage is perceived as a relationship of ownership, where the man is the owner, and the woman is the owned.

2. These critiques by El Saadawi are refuted based on Qur'anic principles for the following reasons: Firstly, contrary to El Saadawi's claim, the marriage contract is based on mutual consent between the parties and imposes mutual obligations, such as dowry, maintenance, and cohabitation, on both sides. Therefore, the primary purpose of marriage, as emphasized in numerous Qur'anic verses, including verse 21 of Surah Al-Rum, is to fulfill the emotional, spiritual, and material needs of both men and women. Secondly, contrary to El Saadawi's assertion, the marriage contract does not result in the unconditional submission of women or function as a relationship of ownership. Many of the obligations arising from this contract are binding on men. For example, dowry, as mentioned in verse 4 of Surah An-Nisa, and maintenance, as mentioned in verse 233 of Surah Al-Baqarah, are obligations imposed on the husband. Therefore, the purpose of marriage in Islamic culture and tradition is not to establish male dominance or

female submission but rather to ensure the equitable distribution of rights and responsibilities in a shared life.

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