

Research Article

Interrogating Masculinity and Power Dynamics in Nawal el Saadawi's *The Death of His Excellency the Ex-Minister*

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Abstract: One of the central issues in Gender studies deals with the question of sex (biological) vs gender (socio-cultural), which must be addressed not only through the lens of feminist theory but also through masculinity studies. The discussions related to gender remain considerably incomplete without embracing issues about the construction of masculinity and the relative power dynamics. As gender is synonymous with power, it is essential to study the complex aspects related to masculinity. Through Nawal el Saadawi's *Death of His Excellency the Ex-Minister*, this paper aims to study the mechanism of power relations in the patriarchal gender order. The selected short story depicts the incidents that led to the fall of the minister, who, on his deathbed, shares the psychological consequences of hegemonic masculinity on his personality and character. This paper, therefore, analyses the profound impact of patriarchal structures, governed by power relations, on both the individual and society.

Keywords: Gender; power; hegemonic masculinity; subordinate masculinity; patriarchy

Introduction

The concepts related to 'sex' and 'gender' have been much exploited in feminist studies. However, this distinction between sex and gender has not been addressed sufficiently in masculinist studies. As such, it is extremely important to study the multifaceted aspects of masculinity. Discussions of masculinity will add a new dimension to the study of gender and power dynamics. As hegemonic masculinity aims to achieve and maintain its superiority, in the process, it puts constraints on and excludes all the other subordinate masculinities as well as femininities. Connell argues that "...achieving hegemony may consist precisely of preventing alternatives from gaining cultural definition and recognition as alternatives. Confining them to ghettos, to privacy, to unconsciousness." (*Gender and Power*, 186). In *The Death of His Excellency the Ex-Minister* (DHEEM), Nawal el Saadawi interrogates the construction of hegemonic masculinity and its impact on the male character's psyche.

Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative approach to an analytical study of the relationship between masculinity and power. It undertakes a close reading of the text to interpret the masculinist aspects of the story *Death of His Excellency the Ex-Minister*. It seeks to develop an understanding of concepts related to gender, masculinity, femininity, and power. It also focuses on the socio-cultural and psychological impact of masculine stereotypes and the inherent power struggle, drawing on the theories outlined, especially those of Raewyn Connell and Michel Foucault. The paper analyses Nawal el Saadawi's story in the light of these theories to study the psychological impact of these on the protagonist, who becomes a victim of the patriarchal gender order.

Masculinity as a form of Power Relation:

According to gender theorists, the personality traits of a person are determined by his/her biological sex. Men are hailed to be the dominant sex in comparison to women, who are assumed to be inferior and submissive. A patriarchal society, that is driven by gender expectations, certifies a certain manner of behavior suited to biological sex. Geert Hofstede points out:

Masculinity is a society in which gender roles are clearly distinct: men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success; women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with quality of life. (*Culture's Consequences*, 297)

Social sciences refer to masculinities as a form of power relation between hegemonic masculinity and subordinated masculinities, as well as between hegemonic masculinity and femininities. Men who are in power positions utilize their positions to dominate women, children, and all other men. As Judith Lorber puts it:

The social reproduction of gender in individuals reproduces the gendered societal structure; as individuals act out gender norms and expectations in face-to-face interaction, they are constructing gendered systems of dominance and power. (*Paradoxes of Gender*, 6)

Power struggle plays an important role in the patriarchal gender order. Power relations lead to the construction of gendered identities. It operates within a network of domination, submission, and resistance (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*). It is an integral part of a person's existence, his manners, behavior, discourses, etc. In *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault states that:

Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain . . . Power is employed and exercised through a netlike organization. . . Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application. (98)

Thus, power is not static but a dynamic, constantly evolving process. Similarly, hegemonic masculinity also evolves and transforms with changing dynamics in social, cultural, and historical orders. This ensures the superiority of masculine power in a patriarchal society. Hegemonic masculinity functions on the principle of the power of men over women and other men. These dominant ideas are presented as natural and normal, thereby giving men greater political, economic, and social power. Such a society maintains that some men must have a greater social status than other men and that they can dominate both men and women.

About the Author:

Nawal el Saadawi is a well-known figure from the Arab literary world who has fiercely voiced and protested against the social, political, and economic exploitation of women in Egypt. She is known as the "Simone de Beauvoir of the Arab world" for her prolific feminist writings that focus on the secondary position of women, man-woman relationships, and the power and authority attributed to men in Egyptian society. Some of her important works include *The Absent One* (1969), *God Dies by the Nile* (1974), *Woman at Point Zero* (1975), *Two Women in One* (1985), *The Fall of the Imam* (1987), and *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* (1993). She has written several collections of short stories. She has famously contributed to non-fiction that advocates for women's political and sexual rights. She also penned plays that faced censorship and sparked intense controversy. Although she concentrates on the lives and conditions of women in Egypt, many of her short stories depict male narrators who are victims of hegemonic masculinity, its performance, and its inherent power dynamics.

Man as the Oppressor and the Oppressed:

In an Egyptian family, the father is considered the sole authority, as he is the head and breadwinner. He has authority over all the other members of his family, including younger men. He is the one who enjoys the right to make decisions for all the other family members. It is the father who introduces his sons to hegemonic masculinity by exhibiting his manner and method of controlling the women and children. Slowly and gradually, the male child internalizes the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. The protagonist in *Death of His Excellency the Ex-Minister* (DHEEM) affirms such internalization:

From the time I became a government employee, I hated being subordinate. I got used to repressing my feelings of hatred before my superiors and would give

vent to them only in my office with my subordinates, or at home with my wife, just like I saw father do with you, Mother. (DHEEM 11)

Patriarchy demands that men imitate their 'father'. Over time, these actions become an internalized practice. A person is forced to behave as expected of him. Foucault explains in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1991) that such a person "inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (202-203). Now the person plays a dual role – the oppressor and the oppressed. A new form of power emerges in which even if the oppressor is absent, the oppressed behaves as if he is constantly being watched. The protagonist relates his failure and inability to look his superiors in the eye due to fear of his father. He questions his mother thus:

So why didn't you raise your eyes to Father's so that I could have learned how to do it? Maybe if you'd done it just once, I'd have been able, as a child, to overcome my fear of him just once. Moreover, maybe, as an employee, I'd have been able to overcome my fear of any person in a position of authority. (DHEEM 20)

Michael Kimmel believes that the greatest mistake committed by feminism and feminists was to treat all men as equally empowered patriarchs. He states that although all men "may be in power everywhere one cares to look, individual men are not 'in power', and they do not feel powerful" (*The Gendered Society*, 2004, 100). The greatest victim of the ideals of masculinity is the man himself. He remains oppressed and marginalized as he fails to resist the patriarchal dominance. The protagonist expresses his nervousness and anxiety in the presence of the President of the State:

I was so sensitive, Mother, that I would feel my stomach tremble as if it contained an electric circuit, especially when I stood next to or near him. I'd feel the fingers of my hand tremble, even though I would clasp them with my left hand, with both the right and left pressed against my chest or stomach. My legs would also be pressed together, whether I was sitting or standing. That's how I was, Mother, when I was with him. (DHEEM 12-13)

Although he panics and gets nervous in the presence of his superior, he exhibits his hegemonic position in the presence of women and his subordinates. He is not able to tolerate the bold and assertive demeanor of his subordinate, a woman, who dares to look into his eyes with a strong and steady gaze. He is not able to comprehend how a woman can have the audacity to look into the eyes of a minister:

No, what really angered me, Mother, was that she had done something I myself had never done. I have never, in all my life, been able to raise my eyes to those of anyone of my superiors, even if he were a junior employee with only slight power over me. My anger grew, Mother, each time I tried to understand why I was incapable of doing that while she could, even though I'm a man and she's a woman, just like any other woman! (DHEEM 19)

Hegemonic masculinity is placed at the top of the power-based hierarchical structure. Male-dominated sectors such as politics promote hierarchical structures owing to the

strength of “the patriarchal dividend” (Connell, *Gender in World Perspective* 142). On account of this, the gender gap between men and women is heightened in workplaces, and hegemonic masculinity gives advantage to men and positions women as secondary. Hence, the protagonist goes mad with rage when he realizes that a woman, considered second to a man, can act confidently. In contrast, he, a man in an influential position, fails to hold his gaze when addressing his superiors. Her bold attitude challenges his masculinity and male ego.

The culture of a patriarchal society promotes the social stereotypes of sexually assertive men who view women in sexual terms. Women are viewed as sexual objects in workplaces and educational institutions where men hold positions of power and authority. The protagonist takes advantage of his authoritative position and does everything in his capacity to humiliate and ridicule the bold female employee and prove his masculinity:

Don't you know that whoever you are, you're nothing but a junior employee and I am a minister, and that no matter how far up the ladder you go, in the end you're a woman whose place is in bed underneath a man? (DHEEM 16)

Although the narrator humiliates her in an office full of men – all senior to her – she does not waver and looks straight in his eyes. On the other hand, he is so overtaken by anger and hatred for the woman that he gets a fever and has to stay at home. Moreover, his temperature does not subside until he does everything in his capacity as a minister to “break that woman and utterly destroy her” (DHEEM 18). Even though he suspends her from her position, he cannot tolerate her existence. Her confidence and boldness drive him crazy, and he gradually loses his dignity:

However, what occupied and dominated my mind to the extent of stripping me of my willpower was that, although she was a female and although she was a junior employee, ..., she had managed to do something out of the ordinary, breaking every convention with which we are brought up from the time we're born, all the values we have known since the time we found ourselves alive and became human. (DHEEM 24)

He is so upset that he behaves irrationally in a public meeting in the presence of the State's President. As a result, he loses his position as a minister. Thus, the internalized pressures of hegemonic masculinity contribute considerably to the psychological degradation of the protagonist. The culturally idealized form of manhood is so rigid and unforgiving that it damages the physical and mental well-being of men.

Conclusion:

This paper charts the consequences of the social and psychological pressure on men to “achieve”, “prove,” or “demonstrate” their masculinity (Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 4). Through this story, Saadawi depicts the plight of “a chronically anxious, temperamentally restless manhood – a manhood that carries with it the constant burdens of proof” (Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, x). She interrogates gendered relationships and the inherent power dynamics that suffocate men so much that it eventually leads to the death of the protagonist.

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