



Research Paper

## Women And The War Zone: A Reflection On Liana Badr's The Eye Of The Mirror

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper discusses the war-torn lives of the Palestinian refugees, with a special emphasis on the women under the siege, living in Lebanon. In order to critically analyse the social, political and personal oppression of the Palestinian women, this paper shall study the novel *The Eye of the Mirror* by Liana Badr, translated into English by Samira Kawar. It shall explore the multi-level oppression and the female strength to deal with such incidents. The theme of displacement, loss of identity, honour and sexuality are dealt with, under the lens of multiple theories encompassing various forms of feminisms. Simultaneously, it also reflects upon the slipping of authority from the hands of male members and the aggressive behaviour, they resort to, in order to maintain their relevance.

**Keywords:** War, Displacement, Sexuality, Identity Crisis, Patriarchy, Violence.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Palestine, since its occupation by Israeli forces, has been one of the most politically controversial nations among the Arab countries. After various theories arguing in favour of occupation as an equivalent of prosperity and economic independence of the occupied nation and its residents, a contrary opinion that such occupation is not empowering at all, seeks voice. It has refused any form of economic independence to Palestinian women. Yet, it cannot be denied that Israel's occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, did lead to a metamorphosis of role of women in the nation. The movement for liberation witnessed an overwhelming participation by the Palestinian women, both at the domestic, as well as national level. It gave them an opportunity to deconstruct the traditional gender roles assigned to them and subvert the patriarchal roles. It exposed them to traumatic and critical war situations and bred resilience in them.

This paper shall reflect upon the similar crisis in the lives of Palestinian women and how they stood up against all the odds taking up the role of saviours of their families. It shall foreground how their being a woman added to their survival value, putting on their guards against universally generalised patriarchy. They create a counter-narrative to what had been earlier popularised as the women subjugation in Islamic culture. This shall be done through a critical review of Liana Badr's *The Eye of the Mirror*, where the protagonist is subjected to the horrors of war as well as the suppression by patriarchy.

Labenese Civil War is the second violent encounter of Aisha, in the land where she and her family had sought refuge. Tal Ezza'tar stays her second home only for a short while till its siege. She is a Palestinian refugee in a foreign land, therefore is not liable to enjoy the equal rights of a citizen. Her childhood is spent earning the little knowledge she can, by working in a school.

She would take the cleaning implements and roam the rooms and corners. The girls would go to the washroom and bathrooms, leaving a hellish chaos in their wake. Aisha would enter the rooms one by one. She would throw open the windows and the shutters, and make beds, tidying the blankets left in piles on the sheets. She would smooth out the pillows and beat them rhythmically to even out the cotton inside them. Then she would put away in the cupboard the clothes left lying everywhere (Badr 6).

Aisha always felt the "otherness" while she stayed at the school. She was discouraged to talk to the girls or "to mix with the daughters of influential families." Not only is her existence put into oblivion as "She would turn her back"(7) but, she is also deprived of a normal childhood, as Badr tells us, when it would be time for other girls to play, "she would do her chores"(5). Among all this she still had nurtured a dream of becoming a teacher, to be "someone of whom the whole world would take notice"(10) but, her whole world of expectations is dashed down after a tragic incidence. At an instance of a massacre of the bus carrying refugees,

Aisha's mother expressed her horrors saying, "We have become refugees, without a country, without dignity, without a home. Our honour was lost long ago and now our children are dying. The bus. The bus. The bus. Woe is me. We have such ill-fortune"(8). It is her terror and insecurities about their future that force her to take Aisha out of the school. The camp was her permanent home for now but, "she doesn't like it here, to live or to stay"(10). "It's as though everyone were conniving against her...turning her into a corpse of constrained misery, while the girls in the playground still chased their dreams that floated in the air like white butterflies and pursued their games behind the tree of secrets"(10).

A little relief is experienced by her by the presence of George, a sniper. For Aisha, "the beauty of the whole world is concentrated in his face and body, which are surrounded by a halo like the prophets"(28). But, her love does not find space in the patriarchal world, that views any display of intense emotions by women as inappropriate and detestable. As a result, her silenced love finds its physical manifestation in Aisha's talking to herself, "How handsome he is, how good looking"(30). Initially, this love of hers for George makes her a mute as "she looks at him. Forgets herself. Stops feeling everything around her...She hears him only, and feels him alone"(29). Aisha is so scared of expressing her feelings that "she hopes that no one notices her obsession, not even she herself" (30).

Love becomes her defence mechanism against the harrowing experience of the Labenese Civil War until, this love, which she longed for silently, is reflected in her physiological discomfort when "the pain moves from her heels to her spine, and she is unable to lift her body, as though her joints are being pulverized by stone weights. The physical pain also transcends to her psychological self. "If she stares at anything, it floats up into space and disappears. Sounds enter her ears like echoes. Any laughter she hears hits her head like stones being thrown at her"(47). Aisha's delirium kept her engaged in the question,

"Where is George?" That was the question buzzing through her mind like a savage bee stinging her eyes. Then noose of terror dangled around her shoulders. The rope tightens around her neck. The land is a wilderness desolate. Nothing but a sulphurous yellow powder pouring down on her hair, her cheek, her feet. Her flesh melts away, disappears, evaporates... And she begins to disintegrate, turning into a skeleton with hollow eye sockets. A premonition tells her that the skeleton is George, not her own body. George! George! Where is he? She shouts, uttering unintelligible words (49).

Aisha suffers silently because she was aware that her love would not be accepted in the society she lives. The absence of George further intensifies her illness: "She was in panic. When would he come? His presence was a magic balsam with which she would rub her body and all her pains would disappear... The nausea. The vomiting. The cramps... She would only awaken from her high fever to take a sip of water, which her intestines would reject" (48).

According to Carole Vance, "The tension between sexual danger and sexual pleasure is a powerful one in women's lives. Sexuality is simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency. To focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women's experience with sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live"(327). This terror mixed with an embarrassment for her evolution into a grown up woman is witnessed in Aisha. She feels disgusted by the bodily changes because of "her mother's inquisitive gaze as it searched her body inch by inch, and the intrusive stare of her father, who would never stop gaping at her"(14). In this regard, Liz Kelly suggests that "men sexualize all relationships with women" (347). Badr gives an account of the panopticon gaze of Aisha's father:

His eagle-like eyes stare around the room, then land on her as he inhales the tobacco in his cigarette with obvious pleasure. His glances follow her, clutching onto the edges of her dress like a fore that lights up whenever it comes her way(22).

The violent association of honour and moral code made Aisha agitated as everyone noticed her protruding breasts, but for her, "it was a new useless organ, giving rise to embarrassment and a deep sense of superfluity and meaninglessness"(14). Amidst the communal violence and Civil war, her body becomes the primary site of violence against her. It is the violence of a belief that she is merely a sexual being. Since, "her mother could never stop talking about the awaited bridegroom", Aisha's disgust only intensified and left her baffled with the question, "What had marriage to do with what was happening to her?"(16). Here, Aisha's mother becomes an agent to legitimise the patriarchal hold over a woman. Diana Gittins sees such structures as "the essence of patriarchy" (qtd. in Kelly 346) and marriage as the primary manifestation of authority. A counter-view can also be put forward, according to which, women (mothers) seem to exert power of their daughters but "in contrast to such fathers, be perceived as submissive, self-effacing, and powerless" (185), as Nancy Chodorow mentions in *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory*:

To emphasise the emotional (and even social, cultural and political) power of the mother... does not preclude a recognition of the father's social, cultural, and political (and even emotional) power. However, although such a position is not incompatible with a view that locates power in the father, it is incompatible with

arguments that the father, either as actual or symbolic presence, controls the mother-child relation entirely, or that motherhood is solely an institution that sustains women's powerlessness, or that we can only understand the mother-daughter relation as it is experienced in the domain of the father. Fathers are not only socially and culturally dominant; they can be personally domineering, seductive and exciting, often as an alternative to the taken-for-granted mother (185).

The violence against women is not merely limited to the penetrating gaze, but takes a physical form as in the case of Aisha's mother, who justifies her ill-treatment at the hands of her husband. "In a very ordinary tone, she would say: "To avoid an unholy row, my child. What else can I do. It's a choice between him beating me up and me giving him the money. Giving it to him is better.""(15). In this regard, Liz Kelly argues,

The more power a man can claim over a particular woman, the greater his claim to exclusive access. The greater his perceived right to exclusive sexual access, the more likely it is that some level of sexual aggression will be considered legitimate (347).

The men, who have been displaced from their nation and robbed off any sort of authority they could assert in their society, are left with only women, to re-establish their lost dignity. Liz Kelly locates masculinity in "the notions of virility, conquest, power and domination and these themes are reflected in gender relations and heterosexual practice; sex and aggression are linked for most men" (347). Amidst the loss of the territory, men in the novel feel conquered, powerless, suppressed and probably, try to locate their power in exercise of strength over women. Assayed's reflection on marriage further asserts this idea, when he says, "People don't marry off their daughter's for money; they do it for the sake of propriety. It would be better for them to marry her off instead of allowing her to go all over the place...If I were them, I would pay to see to it that she would be contained and kept at home" (48). When the power had already been lost, an alternative to preserve the identity is the assertion of the same as Assayed does when Aisha calls him "Papi". Assayed rebuked Aisha saying, "You, shame on you. We're Palestinians." Aisha sees this rationale as a mere excuse "to humiliate her" (23).

Aisha's mother takes to avoiding the unpleasant presence of Assayed "because the experience of her long life had taught her to avoid the man his cruel nature. She dealt with him like a stream of water, going around the rock, but never penetrating it"(64). Aisha follows her mother's footsteps when, at an instance, "she made a rush for the roof, careful to give the impression that her trip was nothing to do with running away from him, but purely to do with her household chores... She fled him so that he would not repeat the anecdote he would never tire of telling to ridicule her"(22).

While Aisha is still in love with George, her marriage is fixed with Hassan. Badr, poignantly juxtaposes the scenario as "they laughed and danced, and she cried" (98). The idea of her being married off leaves her grief-stricken: "Aisha was preoccupied with the shame spreading across her body like a hellish flower that would grow that night, exploding into blood that would trickle down her legs"(99). Aisha hunts desperately for a space of her own, "to escape those present"(100).

In the bathroom, she was choking like a slaughtered rooster. Her eyes fell on a pair of scissors that had been left on a window sill. She picked them up and began cutting off her hair in front of the broken mirror...She cut off her hair in terror as her sobbing rose, drowning out the ululating and chanting outside. She cut the tresses as though they were superfluous waste paper. Her weeping turned into loud wails, its rhythm rising in her ears. She heard her mother's pounding on the door. She paid no attention and did not open the door (101).

Aisha's such escapist behaviour may be studied and can be justified under the light of the following analysis given by Liz Kelly:

Feminist analysis of power and sexuality leads to an understanding that social control is the purpose, and may also be the outcome, of gendered social relations. The threat and reality of sexual violence may result in women developing strategies for self-protection which result in apparently voluntary limitations of mobility, territory and encounters. It is also the case, however, that the threat and reality of sexual violence may prompt both individual and collective resistance to men's power (348).

Aisha becomes an anti-heroine as she develops resistance for the established norms of virtue and beauty. Aisha's hair that "now looked like the torn hides of calves at the butcher's shop" (102) symbolises her defiance and hatred of being married to a stranger. This can be justified through an observation by Elizabeth Grosz, that says: "Hysteria is a somatisation of psychological conflict, an acting out of resistance rather than its verbal articulation or conceptual representation. It is according to Freud, a largely feminine neurosis...It is a form of protest against and resistance to cultural investments defining what the 'proper' body is for women" (302). On her wedding night, "she felt crushed and unable to breathe properly...The man burst into her, assaulted her body"(103). The sexual pleasure is soon replaced by sexual violence. The violator of a woman's body only change faces: a father, a lover, a husband or the soldiers of Israeli forces, as Um Hasan recounts, "The Haganah gang slaughtered a lot of people, and also raped many women" (109). "Sexual danger", as Carole Vance calls it, persists throughout the society.

The lives of the women in the novel are constantly under conflict: with the men in their family, men politically in power and even women who attempt to maintain the patriarchal norm. It has been witnessed that women exist for men, merely at a sexual level and contrarily, exhibiting any sexual desire in women invites contempt. So, men take complete charge of a woman's sexuality: husband, through marriage and father, through marrying off his daughter and transferring the rights. While men struggle for a national identity, women strive at multiple levels: sexual, physical, mental, social and national.

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