

## **Nawal El Saadawi's 'God Dies by the Nile' and Female Genital Mutilation: A Patriarchal Symbol of Chastity**

**Sumaiyya Samsheer Nadaf<sup>a</sup>, A. D. Joshi<sup>b</sup>**

<sup>a</sup>Assistant Professor, A. S. C. College, Ramanandnagar, (Burla) Kirloskarwadi, Tal.Palus, Dist.Sangli, MS, India

<sup>b</sup>Associate Professor, Head Dept. of English, Sadashivrao Mandalik Mahavidyalaya, Murgud, Tal.Kagal, Dist.Kolhapur, MS, India

### **Abstract**

Culture is the platform where ideologies are born and literature is the expression of these ideologies. These assets are vain of patriarchy. The author of this paper has naturally chosen to write about novel and that too less noticed and less studied, in India, novels of Nawal El Saadawi, an Egyptian writer. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a recurrent theme in Saadawi's fiction. It is related to cultural practices and ideologies that may or may not have sanctioned in the religion. The FGM comprises all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs whether for cultural, religious or other non-therapeutic reasons and does not include medically prescribed surgery or that which is performed for the symbol of women's chastity. The ideology nurtured by the patriarchy almost forces the innocent girls to go through this unhygienic and unscientific surgery. The Egyptian novelist, Nawal-El Saadawi, protests against the oppression of women through the practice of female circumcision. One of her missions in writing the 'novel of protest' is to seek justice for the women who are the victims of the patriarchy. The present paper intends to analyze theme FGM in the novel of Nawal El Saadawi's **God Dies by the Nile (1985)**. The aim of present paper is to focus on unhealthy practices emerged by wrong ideologies. This will be done keeping the Egyptian cultural and religious background in mind since that is where Saadawi's novels are set.

**KEYWORDS:**FGM, Superstition, Chastity, Sexual Oppression, Abolition of Human Right, etc.

### **Introduction**

Although the religion, culture and gender are foundational social constructs operating on the basis of social psychology and organization, three constructs cannot be placed separately and equally, on the same level but interdependent with each other. Religion is an integral part of culture a class of officials who to preserve and proliferate ethical norms for regulation of daily lives of individuals and communities. On the other hand gender is the social construct of sex. The gender identity is a form of norms of behavior imposed on men and women by culture and religion. The systematic domination of women by men, women's exclusion from public power, and their subjugation to patriarchal power within family is the scenario of woman. In many cultures of the world, women are victim of socio-cultural suppression. Historically religion has whether contributed to the marginalization of women or provided the platform for male domination of society.

Karl Marx to describe religion as: “The sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the opium of the people” (1957:38-39)

According to Simon de Bourgh, ‘culture, religion, history, media and language are the vital source of women’s subjugation’. By the issue of gender inequality and source of reproduction of male dominated society, women became a victim of manipulation. Such worse circumstances promoted the strict codes and morals of concerned community’s fantasy with aiming placed woman at inferior position. Females are coping with the crisis of identity due to the cultural diversity of concerned community as well as related country’s geographical background. Likewise the Arab nation’s geographical background and assets of mineral oils are roots of their extreme deeds. Furthermore under the religious and cultural propaganda said society generate their own new male minded culture and ideology where wipe out the rights of women who are awfully considered as symbol of oppression. On opposite according to scripture both gender have a right of equality but said patriarchal society’s own interpretative religion not only utilized but imposed their own codes of behavior which are not assigned in the said books. In course of time such state of affairs’ distinctive issues born in the Middle East countries like polygamy, stigmatization, honor killing, female infanticide, child marriage, and female circumcision etc. which are very horribly exploited women.

In the same way the Egyptian Nawal El Saadawi is a worldwide renowned writer. Worked under different types of tagline such as feminist, physician, novelist, psychiatrist, and author of more than forty books of fiction and nonfiction published. She predominantly writes in Arabic but her literary work translated more than in 20 languages. She deals every issue of the Afro-Arabic women heroically that is the distinguishing feature of her literary study. Saadawi’s most of the novels and books bestowed on the situation of women which deeply affected by successive generations of young women and men over the last five decades but as a result of her literary and scientific writings she has faced by numerous difficulties and even gets danger in her life. In 1972, she lost her job in the Egyptian Ministry of Health because of her book “Women and Sex” published in Arabic (1969) and banned by the political and religious authorities, because in some chapters of the book she wrote against **Female Genital Mutilation** (FGM) and linked sexual problems to the political and economic oppression. The magazine Health, which she founded and had edited for more than three years, was closed down in 1973. In September 1981 President Sadat put her in prison. She was released at the end of November 1981, two months after his assassination. Her aim of writing is to protest women against female circumcision, besides she had tolerated more strange experience of the fanatical society but she didn’t lose her dream. Nawal El Saadawi personally operated by the female genital mutilation at the age of six. Moreover as a doctor she knew shortcomings of female health therefore she fight against it through literary works like magazine and novel but contrary Arabic hegemony reproached her movement and maltreated her however fallen to prey exile.

The present research article’s aim to analyze the cultural ideology of Arab society like female genital mutilation in the novel of Nawal El Saadawi’s God Dies by the Nile where the character like Fatheyais circumcised by the mutilation through Dayanamed Om Saber plays the role of surgeon. Furthermore appraise the psycho-mental situation of

woman as well as physical drawbacks of female health accordingly. The researcher intends to study the socio-religious background of concerned culture.

### **The Female Genital Mutilation**

The Female Genital Mutilation is very treacherous issue of women in all over the world where women don't have a right to protect her physical health as well as sexual pleasure. It is a violation against female and girl, child abuse, and sexual assault. The most of nation's purpose of FGM is tradition, fertility, religion and sexuality although specific culture believes to preserve the virginity of woman before marriage as well as aesthetically pleasing or increases fertility. Unlike male circumcision female circumcision is not a religious agreement required by Islam, Christianity, Jew or any of the other known religions as nonetheless a cultural tradition. Furthermore said tradition not only mentally but psychologically damaged the status of women where as for non-medical reasons cut the physical organ of women which violate the basic right of women and girls to physical integrity. Certain ethnic group carefully as well as gracefully followed this custom due to the habitual burden of the society. Female genital mutilation (FGM) is also known as **female circumcision (FC)**, **female genital cutting**, it is a collective name given to several traditional practices that captivate the cutting of female genital. The local practice has become global concern caused by offending the moral state of women. The said customary practice deals differently at different places. As per the beliefs of ethnic group female circumcision divided in to four categories like Clitoridectomy, Excision, Infibulation, and Incision etc.

According to the definition of the World Health Organization (WHO), 'Female Genital Mutilation **FGM** comprises all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs whether for cultural, religious or other non-therapeutic reasons and does not include medically prescribed surgery or that which is performed for sex change reasons.' (Female Genital Mutilation Survey in Somaliland 2002: 6)

**Female genital mutilation (FGM)** is 'the ritual removal of some or all of the external female genitalia.' Typically carried out by a traditional circumciser using a blade, with or without anesthesia ([www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com))

The procedure commonly operated on female gender everywhere between the ages of four to the age of puberty however, in some cultural custom, it is adopted as early as a few days after birth as late as just prior to marriage or after the first pregnancy. In such wicked practice girls are circumcised alone or with a group of women from their community. Custom performed by a traditional practitioner like old woman known as (Daya). According to historical evidence said practice found in Ancient Egypt but now days FGM is not only practiced among communities in Africa and Middle East but widely practiced in European and Australian communities. As stated by statistic report 100 to 140 million infants, girls and women from the world mutilated by this customary practice.

FGM is functioned over 27 African countries, Yemen and Iraqi, Kurdistan and found elsewhere in Asia, in the Middle East and around the world. More than Egypt, Ethiopia and Nigeria had the highest number of women and girls living with FGM moreover the

percentage aged 15–49 with FGM in the 29 countries in which it is mutilated women by morally and ethically. (UNICEF 2014)

Everywhere and at each stage social activists, feminists fight over female genital mutilation via their work, throughout the contribution of Alice Walker, Nawal El Saadawi overwhelmed by the struggle against female genital cutting. Woman Health Organization has given several health consequences which are harmful moreover convened physical, mental and psychological struggle, problems of women throughout surgery.

### **Nawal El Saadawi's God Dies by Nile and The Practice Female Genital Mutilation**

Non-existent practices, customs and traditions elaborated by the Arabic hegemony to abolish the rights of woman whereas female circumcision one of the customary practice oppressed the life and health of woman. Said despoiled world presented by Nawal El Saadawi, Egyptian feminist through a literary works however attempts to focus on how Egyptian society's culture and ideology utilized for the subjugation of women. Nawal El Saadawi's three novels titled as *Woman at Point Zero* (1982), *God Dies by the Nile* (1984), and *Daughter of Isis* (1999) having major thematic concern like female circumcision. As a physician Nawal El Saadawi acknowledged the psychology of society's culture moreover opines Arabic women's phobia of female circumcision.

During my period of service as a rural physician, I was called upon many times to treat complications arising from this primitive operation, which very often jeopardized the life of young girls. The ignorant daya believed that effective circumcision necessitated a deep cut of razor to ensure radical amputation of the clitoris, so that no part of the sexuality sensitive organ would remain

Above all, the lifelong psychological shock of this cruel procedure left its imprint on the personality of the child and accompanied her into adolescence, youth and maturity. Sexual frigidity is one of the after effects which is accentuated by other social and psychological factors that influence the personality and mental make-up of females in Arab societies. Girls are therefore exposed to a whole series of misfortunes as a result of outdated notions and valued related to virginity, which still remains the fundamental criterion of the girl's honor. (*The Hidden Face of Eve* 1980: 33-34)

The Egyptian feminist Nawal El Saadawi very intently studied Egyptian culture, hegemony, ideology along with experienced inclusive influence of clitoridictomy over women's mentality, psychology, physicality. Though the author would like to signify pathetic condition of women, cultural dominance of Egypt and what actually happened with women in society? In those periods Egyptian feminist Nawal El Saadawi herself means personally experienced by the female genital mutilation at the age of five as well as seen other female members' circumcision. Her observance and investigation being a medical doctor served said circumcision has non-medical surgery which eradicated Arabic women's mental and psychological state of mind.

Throughout her career Nawal El Saadawi provides reader what is the impact of such procedure on the minds of women by the weapon of writing. According to her, along with female circumcision Arabic patriarchy protected the chastity of girls via demoting her desire from sexual intercourse that is the mark of dehumanization.

This is the overall representation of Arab society where said society has had religious fallacy regarding female circumcision correlated with purification of human life which is totally controversial from the liberation of women. After all Nawal El Saadawi shared experience of FGM via book *Hidden Face of Eve* where she provides a poignant illustration of an emotional scars left by this experience. In a result Nawal El Saadawi herself suffered by the consequences of it. As a physician Egyptian novelist Saadawi observed lots of female patient suffered by the problems of circumcision but due to embarrassment and burden of the society don't seeking treatment. Furthermore Nawal El Saadawi imparted self-experience of female circumcision not only to eradicate shame and burden among the Arab women but also to stand her against torture.

"The memory of the circumcision continued to track me down like nightmare. I had a feeling of insecurity, of the unknown waiting for me at every step I took into future"(8). (Nalley, Stacy (2005) "The Legacy of Stories," ESSAI: Vol.3, Article 24:91)

The above incident offers reader facts regarding psychological and mental imbalance of women after the procedure of circumcision. Here Nawal El Saadawi as a medical doctor wounded by it, but she also struggled with psycho-mental disorder. Along this experience the Egyptian feminist wants to impart female circumcision neither injured woman physically nor also spoiled the balance of psyche.

Nawal El Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile* (1985) describes the life of poor peasant women and men in Egypt. A character Zakeya and other female members in her family are oppressed by men in the family, in society and in the streets. Although her two nieces Nefissa and Zeinab were molested by the mayor of village whose life ended by the hands of Zakeya who didn't have had patience to bear oppressed charge upon her family. At every step of life not only women but also men from the peasant family are exploited by the patrician system of the Arabic society; where worst form of torture wielded by the noble people for dominance which is offensive. In spite of this a character like Fatheya is mutilated by female circumcision. Her caricature manifested before and after circumcision very profoundly by Nawal El Saadawi. This is an example of speechless resistance of Arabic woman. However every custom directly and indirectly associated with the patriarchal interpretative religious fundamental without knowing its causal nexus, only for ascendancy in society. The female character Fatheya is forcefully married with Sheikh Hamzawi, head of mosque in the village Kafr-El-Teen who only interested in the beauty of Fatheya and has an obsession of posterity.

Masoud remained silent for a moment, then he called out, 'Fatheya, come here at once.' But there was no answer, so he climbed up on to the top of the oven, pulled her out by her hair, and beat her several times until she came down. Then he handed her over to Haj Ismail and the same day she married the pious old Sheikh.(*God Dies by the Nile*1985:41)

Whereas the family of Fatheya doesn't have strong familiar background yet suffered by the starvation hence she has chosen the option to marry with him. Before marriage as per the cultural restriction, she wounded by the female genital cutting which declined her further mental and psychological state of life. The following incident seems mental oppression of woman. It is an example of terrible stress of the Arabic woman.

Sheikh Hamzawi grasped his stick firmly in his hand, and opened the door of his house. Fatheya strained her ears to catch the tapping sound of his stick through the wall as he

walked on its outer side. She knew the sound well. It had continued to echo in her ears ever since the night of her betrothal. It pierced through the thick shawl wrapped around her body and head as she rode the donkey to Sheikh Hamzawi's house. She could hear its tap, tap, tap, as he walked along the lane by her side. Her father wore a new galabeya and Om Saber, the daya, was clad in a long, black dress. She could not see the old woman for the folds of the shawl were worn tightly round her head. She could not see anything. But she felt. She felt the burning pain left by the woman's finger as it probed up between her thighs looking for blood. And she felt the warm gush and the sticky wet. She did not see the clean white towel stained red, nor the wound the woman's nail had made in her flesh. But she felt her virgin colours had bled, for in her ears resounded the beat of the drums, the shrieks of joy and the high-pitched trilling of the women. (God Dies by the Nile 1985: 41)

Present experience exposed a miserable life of Fatheya though she couldn't rescue herself from cultural oppression that is the restrictive nature of society. Moreover said patriarchy celebrated such custom like jovial occasion with the beating of drums and all, for cheered woman to doing such things. Afterwards people carried Fatheya via donkey towards the house of Sheikh Hamzawi i.e. the extremity and dehumanized action of Arabic patriarchy that couldn't consider Fatheya's ache. It is an example of wickedest violence.

She moved her hand in under the shawl and wiped the sweat from her nose and eyes, but it continued to pour out from the roots of her hair down over her face and her neck to her chest and her back. Underneath her, on the back of the donkey its rough coat was becoming wetter and wetter. The spine of the donkey pressed up between her thighs. She could feel it hard against the wound which was still bleeding inside. With every step, with every beat of the tabla, the back of the donkey rose and fell, and its thin spine moved up and down to rub on her wounds, causing her a sharp pain every time, and making her lips open in noiseless cry. The warm blood trickled out mixing with the sweat which poured down from her body, and the rough coat of the donkey felt soaking wet between her thighs. (God Dies by the Nile 1985:41-42)

Fatheya's suffocative turmoil and male dominated society's negligence is totally contrasted from entity of ethnicity. Furthermore through this experience it appears that woman like Fatheya didn't have right to express her grief of pain. Even at the house of pious and God-fearing man she couldn't stand on her feet but carried in to house like sack of cotton. The character Fatheya has physically as well as emotionally mutilated by the oppression. Said incident proves Arabic patriarchy don't categorized woman as a human being so they treated like it.

After having done what she was supposed to do, Om Saber went away leaving a small wound between her thighs. It continued to bleed for several days. But even after it healed she was still left with something unclean in her body which used to bleed for several days at a time. Each time she had her periods the people around her would have a changed expression in their eyes when they looked at her, or they would avoid her as though there was something corrupt or bad about her. (God Dies by the Nile 1985:42-43)

The said misconception of cultural ideology applied for the sake of subjugation. Actually Arabic patriarchy very technically engraved minds of Arabic woman through superstition like female genital mutilation which is performed for purification. But it seems that in

every sphere of context women are very honestly followed every custom of purification, because women keeps away familial entanglement from her charge of culture. On the other hand Nawal El Saadawi shows the role of Om Saber, Daya in the present novel and how she nurtured her life with the assignments of the society. It might be appear that Arabic patriarchy not considered daya in the category of human being as well as no one notice her day today routine because of her job on the other hand she became part of every household as an account of cultural riot that is the contrasted behavior of Arabic patriarchy. The following incident gives subaltern condition of daya as well as how she obeys entrusted duties of society.

The villagers of Kafr El Teen she was Om Saber, the daya, neither man nor woman, but an asexual being without a family, or relatives or offspring. She lived in a dark mud hut adjoining the hut of Nafoussa the dancer. It was located behind a piece of waste land, near the masque. No one knew when she had arrived in the village, where she came from, or when she had been born. People did not even imagine she would die, for they always saw her on the move from morning till night, going from house to house, helping the women in labour, circumcising the girls or piercing holes in their ears, sprinkling salt in the house the week after the child had been born, consoling wives on the fortieth day after their husbands had died, in fact participating in every occasion for festivity or mourning. (God Dies by the Nile 1985:91)

Meanwhile Nawal El Saadawi emphasized Daya's responsibility of circumcision where she disgracefully pursued. The Arabic patriarchy very shamefully targeted women via female circumcision simultaneously repressed sexuality under the pressure of political ideology. Said incident offers notion like a woman cannot understand other woman's emotion. Daya performed her duty emotionlessly under the procedure of circumcision.

On the wedding night she would tear the virgin's hymen with her finger, or conceal the fact that it was already torn by spraying the white towel on which the virgin's blood was supposed to pour with the blood of a rabbit or a hen. But it was a time for mourning her suffering knew no bounds (God Dies by the Nile 1985:92)

After all the character like Fatheya is suffered by mental, psychological disorder due to the circumcision so that her posture seems us silent. She couldn't utter single word in the whole novel because of control. Her astonishing response indicates the patience of woman who passively endured exploitation of patriarchy. Concisely Arab society has persisted vain of patriarchy via culture, traditions and political ideology. It is an answer of control. Overall women characters like Fatheya and Dayavery painfully survived their life as regards of Arabic hegemony, but at last both are abolished by their identity because of female category.

### **Conclusion**

Briefly eighty years old first feminist activist Nawal El Saadawi spent past 60 years of her life beating for an end to the barbaric practice of female genital mutilation which undergoing by 140 million women in world. Her fight against female genital mutilation intended to create awareness and unveil the mind of woman to protect rest of the womanhood. In order to preserve modesty female genital mutilation operated which is totally wrong. F.G.M. is the most sensational topic of Egyptian novelist Nawal El Saadawi's writing. She is able to speak about it as a victim and also as a physician, in

fiction and in non-fiction. She exposes it as both a destructive, dangerous custom and a poignant symbol of male domination. Egyptian women survive silently throughout their entire life with it without uttering single word. On the other hand Nawal El Saadawi along with acknowledgement of circumcision provides women platform whether to fight or to protest it. Following question and its response delivers the current situation of cultural custom female circumcision in Egypt.

Is Female Genital Mutilation still an issue in Egypt?

It certainly is! Female genital mutilation is still a serious problem of Egypt, despite the fact that a law was passed to ban this practice, the number of circumcisions has not decreased. The rate of circumcisions amongst young girls is 97%. The government is not serious about banning this practice, nor is the media, they don't care about the health of young women and girls. It is a corrupt government- they don't care. They only passed the law to avoid a scandal after a film was shown of a young girl being circumcised and bleeding to death. They are not serious about it. I am still censored on Egyptian television when I speak about the issue in Egypt. Male circumcision is a problem too; I am against that as well, as a doctor. There has been no progress on this front. ([http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/n/nawal\\_el\\_saadawi.html#GHFxBgPw0KD2OsCh](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/n/nawal_el_saadawi.html#GHFxBgPw0KD2OsCh))

Here is an example of hindrance of women's status by the forced oppression. The said customary practice creates inferiority of women in other sphere of life. The rationale behind of FGM is to be ensured women's chastity which protected an honor of the family. According to Arabic patriarchy female genital mutilation is a sign and symbol of women's chastity, female modesty, and premarital virginity whereas every woman is forcefully adhered custom without knowing its pros and cons. As per the social and cultural background of the female cutting it seems that Arabic patriarchy prepared girl for marriage and its overall responsibility via said custom. However According to the study of Nawal El Saadawi it was good for one's health and conducive to cleanliness and purity as well as her conclusion of research provided facts of Egyptian society.

There is no longer any doubt that circumcision is the source of sexual and psychological shock in the life of girl, and leads to a varying degree of sexual frigidity according to the woman and her circumstances. Education helps parents realize that this operation is not beneficial and should be avoided, but I have found that the traditional education given in our schools and universities, whose aim is simply some certificate, or degree, rather than instilling useful knowledge and culture, is not very effective in combating the long-standing and established traditions that govern Egyptian society, and in particular those related to sex, virginity in girls and religious values that have dominated and operated in our society for hundreds of years. (The Hidden Face of Eve 1980: 39)

To sum up education, legal law and its sentence are must to protect young girl's life from female cutting whereas considered role of woman is significant, if she set aside physical life from harm can existed. Nawal El Saadawi's self-experience and character like Fatheya and their mutilation provide reader how to defend towards it. Everywhere cultural custom and political ideology worked to imbibe seeds of patriarchy whereas

woman's self -action and standpoint are necessary if you want to eradicate exploitation of patriarchy.

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### **Interview**

Mitchell Alliton May 16, 2010 Interview

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