

Women living under muslim laws
النساء في ظل قوانين المسلمين
Femmes sous lois musulmanes

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Impact of Fanatic Religious Thought: A Story of a Young Egyptian Moslem Woman

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An Egyptian man had been very strict with his daughter, only permitting her to work outside the home on condition that she be completely isolated from men. She found that 'ideal' job. Many months later, in the spring of 1988, this same man brought his daughter to the office of Nawal Al Saadawi to see her in her capacity as a psychiatrist. The following is based on the young woman's true story. Egyptian Television wanted to produce a film based on this story - on condition that the protagonist not be a veiled woman, as she was in real life.

A Case of a Young Woman

A few days ago a young woman came to me. She told me her story and asked me to write a prescription. I didn't prescribe any medication. I don't believe that pills can cure this young woman. The problem seems to be a psychological and social problem. This is why I would like the readers to share their opinions with me on this case. The story of the young woman follows.

Since last year she has begun staring into space at night without sleeping. When she falls off to sleep she see a flood inundating the land and the Prophet Noah embarking on his ship and leaving her behind. She finds herself in life after death walking on a narrow path with the inferno lying below her. Her feet are bleeding and her body, off balance, is about to fall. She opens her eyes and finds herself asleep in bed under the blankets drowning in her own sweat. She reads the opening sura of the Koran and thanks God that she hasn't died yet and has a chance to repent. She goes to the bathroom and washes five times. She dresses herself in a long loose robe and wraps her head with a thick cloth. After she prays she sits with God's book in her lap, reading and asking God's for forgiveness for her grave sin. There is nothing in her life except that sin. Since she was born she has gone to bed hearing the voice of her father reciting the Koran. Since infancy her face has not been seen by a stranger. During her student years she never talked to anyone. After graduation she went to work in a place where there was no one other than herself - a storeroom in the basement of a small museum never visited by anyone. She would sit at her desk with a register in front of her recording the number of mummies that came in to be stored or registering the ones already there. She dusts the mummies with a small yellow cloth. She counts them and records them in the register. She closes the register and puts it in a drawer. Then she opens up God's book and reads until the time the employees leave work.

Carrying her handbag she walks an hour and a half to her home. She covers the distance with a steady, controlled pace, no movement of her body discernible under her thick robe. Her head, wrapped in black cloth, is inclined towards the ground. In the heat and cold she walks the distance twice a day, back and forth. She doesn't ride the bus so that no one will brush against her from behind. She doesn't take a taxi alone with an unknown driver. At home she washes off the dust from the road, performing her ablutions and praying before she eats. After she eats she goes to sleep with God's book under her pillow. She wakes up at the sound of her father's voice calling her

to fix his food. After he eats he prays and asks God to protect his daughter from the devil. If it weren't for the forty-seven pounds every month he wouldn't have let her leave the house. He's an old man without an income and she has no husband to support her. Nobody approached her for marriage except the son of his sister who is penniless and unemployed. If God had sent her a husband in sound financial condition she wouldn't have left the house.

In her room she moves up and down in prayer. She does not ask God to send her a husband. She has dismissed the idea of marriage since childhood. Her mother died haemorrhaging when her husband hit her after she had gone to bed. Death is inevitable but she wants to die in a different way, not by being beaten. There is no man in her life. She doesn't know anything about the other sex. If she hears the sound of music or singing coming from the neighbours she plugs her ears with her fingers and shuts the windows and doors tight.

One day last April she was sitting as usual at her desk. She had finished counting the mummies and statues when she discovered a statue that was not there the day before. She looked back over the entries in the register, closed it and put it back in the drawer. She opened God's book and started to read without a sound, her head bowed. While she was reading her eyes peered through the two narrow holes of the black cloth and moved around the mummies and statues. They became fixed on the face of the statue. The features were carved in a strange way. The strangest of all were the eyes. They were looking at her with a movement in the pupils that she had never seen before in any other statue. She asked God's forgiveness. She asked God to protect her from the devil. She bowed her head to continue, but her eyes moved involuntarily towards the statue smaller than the other statues. The dust covered it as if it had been neglected for years in the storeroom. She removed the dust from the statue, putting it near the window. She returned to reading God's book but her eyes peered through the two small holes, attracted by the face of the statue and its eyes with their strange movement. The eyes were slanted slightly upwards like ancient Egyptian's eyes. She held the statue in her hand covered with a black glove and started looking for a symbol or letters that might reveal the name of the person or the time he lived. There was nothing. She put the statue back and returned to her seat behind the desk. Her eyes settled on the lines in God's book. But the question turned around in her head. Had anybody else before her seen this movement in the eyes of the statue?

No other person worked in the museum except the old woman who was the manager. She would come down to her from time to time inspecting the entries in the inventory and passing her eyes over the statues one after the other; she might stop at one that would draw her attention. That day the manager's eyes passed over the small statue without being attracted by anything. She was puzzled. Why hadn't the manager seen the movement in the eyes of the statue that she saw? The same question nagged her every day. As soon as she enters the office and sits down her eyes settle on the face of the statue. The movement in his eyes is still there. Now it becomes a movement especially for her. He doesn't look anywhere with these eyes except at her. Since she saw it for the first time she never stops looking at it. If she turns her head away or leaves the office his eyes are always in front of her, continually looking at her with the same expression, as if he were alive now, not seven thousand years ago. In his gaze there is no arrogance of the Pharaoh gods nor humility of the slaves. What is in it? She doesn't know. Every day she's overcome by her desire to know. This grows, day after day, into a sinful desire. Whenever she sits at her desk she looks around her, afraid that the manager might suddenly appear and catch her while she is looking in his eyes. The thing she fears most is that an order will be issued to transfer him to another storeroom. When she goes to bed she is unable to sleep. What happens if she returns to her office in the morning and doesn't see him? Since finding him she starts to walk to her office with a faster pace and when she opens the door and enters her eyes peer through the two holes, looking for his face among the faces of the other statues. When she sees the movement in his eyes her closed lips part with a faint sigh underneath the black cloth.

One day she entered her office and she didn't find him. She searched all over the storeroom but he wasn't there. She looked in every corner, below the legs of the large statues, over the floor where hundreds of small statues were lying. He wasn't there. She returned to her desk to sit down. She couldn't write anything in the register and she couldn't read a single line in God's book. Her head is bent and her heart is heavy. Where did he go? His place next to the window is vacant. The whole

universe is empty. There is nothing in her whole life. Nothing at all. Her hand under the black glove is cold and the blood in her veins stops moving. All around her she sees nothing but death in the shape of stone statues. Sitting at her desk she herself is also dying at the same time.

She lifted her eyes with an abrupt movement, the same way air rushes out of the chest before the last breath, and saw him hiding behind the windowpane. The manager wouldn't have understood what happened if she had appeared at this moment. Her outside appearance was the same. She is sitting in her chair behind her desk with the register in front of her. Her head is bent and nothing in her moves except the black pupils through the two holes and the rushing movement of hot blood in the veins under her skin.

Before leaving that day she hid him in her handbag to take him home with her. In the morning she brought him back to his place. The manager did not notice his absence and reappearance. At home her father didn't notice that he was inside her wardrobe. At night, after her father sleeps, she takes him out of the wardrobe and places him in front of her and doesn't stop looking at his face. She sleeps with her eyes fixed on his eyes. In her dreams she sees him standing while a flood inundates the earth. She sees him standing in front of her in flesh and blood. And the flood inundating the land and the Prophet Noah climbing into his ark and leaving without him. Could it be that he is the son of the Prophet Noah who did not get into the ark and was drowned? Could it be that he is a sinner who followed the devil and not a believer who followed God? And more important, is it possible for him to come back alive after dying seven thousand years ago?

In the morning when she opens her eyes, the question spins in her head. She walks down the street to her office, her head bent, afraid to raise her eyes. Afraid she will see him in front of her in flesh and blood, the same way she saw him in her dream. Through the two small holes in the black cloth her eyes start to move, to rise slowly, glancing cautiously in the faces of the passers-by. Perhaps, among these human beings there is a face that resembles his? Or eyes with the same look?

Two months pass and she does not stop thinking. Her eyes do not stop stealing looks at the faces of people on the street as she moves back and forth between her home and office. Sixty days pass and among the faces she doesn't see a single one that looks like his, nor among the eyes any that have his look.

She sleeps restlessly at night and while she sleeps the dream recurs. She sees the earth inundated in a sea of water and herself standing at the entrance of the city and suddenly she sees him in front of her. Now he does not notice her presence. He walks calmly forward, then turns around and looks at her. In his eyes is the same look which never changes. The water covers him from all sides. He keeps looking at her until he disappears under the water. His eyes are the last to disappear.

In the morning she opens her eyes, the roaring of the water still in her ears. The voices screaming for help are drowned by the sound of the crashing waters. In the moment between wakefulness and sleep the dream appears as the destruction of her town seven thousand years ago which she has seen with her own eyes. He was drowned seven thousand years ago among those God took in the flood. She continues lying on her bed. It is late for getting to the office. She rises up with a heavy body and in the mirror sees her eyes red and full of tears. With a touch of her finger she recognizes real tears. She knows she was weeping over his drowning. What made her weep most was that he was not a follower of God.

She recognizes clearly that he was a follower of the devil. No matter, tears continue to gush from her eyes as she stands in front of the mirror. It seems as if he died at that very moment, not seven thousand years ago.

On her way to the office that morning as she stopped at an intersection, she lifted her eyes to look at the traffic light when suddenly she saw him among the people crossing the street. She recognized him immediately. The face was his face - the ancient Egyptian features. The eyes were his eyes. In them there is the same movement and look. Involuntarily her body lunged towards

him. She was about to grab him by the hand but she stopped at the last moment. Her closed lips parted from under the black cloth crying, "You?!"

The street was crowded with people rushing along. They stopped amazed at the scene. They saw her rushing towards him and him fleeing from her. She, a young woman, and he, a young man, walking in the street. It isn't normal for a young woman to rush towards a man that she doesn't know in that way. And she was not just any young woman. She was a creature from whose being nothing appears except two small holes in a black cloth. She was rushing towards him and he was escaping from her with fast steps. The scene appeared to the onlookers as both strange and amusing.

Their laughter rang in her ears and she shrank under her thick clothing. She continued to shrink all day long sitting at her desk, the register in front of her. His face is the same face and his eyes have the same movement and a look more human than the look in the eyes of the people in the street, even though he died seven thousand years ago with those who drowned in the flood. She wept for his death. Every human being dies but the stone statue has lived for seven thousand years. Is the stone more permanent than humans?

The question turns around in her head without an answer. Now she has a friend made of stone. She feels his presence more than the presence of any other human being with a body. The word -body- escaped from between her closed lips without a sound. The word in itself produces a shiver in her own body. She doesn't know exactly where the shiver is. Through the two holes from under the thick cloth her eyes steal a look at her body. In her chest there is a heart that beats. In her head there are veins through which blood flows hot as air. Her mind understands that her friend is nothing but a statue of stone. But she sees in his eyes the look of one about to speak.

Is it possible he will speak? And in what language? In Arabic or ancient Egyptian? Is it fantasy or reality? And if it is fantasy where does it come from? Does her imagination mix with the blood in her veins and head? The question turns in her head with the movement of blood like a whirlpool in the sea. And the water drowns her like a flood and he is standing in front of her and in his eyes there is a human look. Deep inside herself she is sure he is a human being - more human than all the people in the universe. He cannot be an evil person. She can swear in full consciousness that he is follower of God and not of the devil.

She was fully conscious. If anyone saw her they would have doubt about this. Her father sees her the same way he sees her every day, full of modesty, totally covered, going to her office and returning home on time. The director of the museum sees her sitting conscientiously with either the register in front of her or the book of God. On the road she walks with a measured step with her head lowered.

One day while she was walking she turned her eyes through the two holes and saw him, stepping out of a door of a house and crossing the street with calm steps, mindless of the screaming horns. She saw him. The same person. She could not mistake him after all these days. Her feet were nailed to the ground. Her hand inside the black glove was raised over her heart. He was standing in the middle of the street. Around him the cars were rushing like the flood. She thought he would fall and be drowned among the wheels but he did not fall. He continued walking at his calm pace towards Nile Street. Her body rushed after him. She recognises that he is a phantom and not a reality. But she sees him with her eyes. As long as she sees him with her eyes she doesn't care whether he is phantom or reality. Her feet walk behind him. In her ears she hears the sound of his shoes on the pavement. He's only a few steps ahead of her. If she speaks to him it's possible he'll hear her. She doesn't know what to call him. He doesn't have a name.

Her sealed lips under the thick cloth parted with a sound: "You." She saw him turn around and look at her face to face. She recognized that it was him. The eyes were his eyes and the expression his expression. She heard him say, "Who are you?" His surprise silenced her. She stood nailed to the street. He was speaking in Arabic not ancient Egyptian. She thought he knew her as she knew him. How is it that she has known him all this time and he asks, "Who are you?" She stood looking at

him without moving. Then she directed her eyes towards the ground. Her head remained lowered for a long time as she shrunk in shame inside herself. After all this he asks her who she is. Her mind did not believe it. She lifted her eyes once more to be sure what was happening, but he had turned around and gone his own way, disappearing among the people.

The second day on the way to her office her head was lowered as usual, but her eyes were moving like two bees inside the two holes, looking at the faces of the people. Her mind says to her that he is no longer living, that he lived seven thousand years ago, but her eyes never stop searching. Her mind tells her he exists. She has seen him. As long as he exists she can see him again. She is overtaken by the wish to see him in any shape. Let him be made of flesh and blood or of spirit without body. What's important is that she sees him. What's the difference if he is a spirit or a body, as long as she is able to see him?

She waited in the same place where she had met him yesterday. When he appeared in the street, she lunged towards him with her body. It was him, with his face and eyes and human expression. Nothing had changed except for a black moustache that had grown over his upper lip. Her closed lips parted underneath the thick cloth, emitting a word without a sound, "Male!" Not in her whole life had she uttered that word. She had thought he was simply a human being without sex, but this moustache means that he is... Her feet remained nailed to the ground, her hand inside the black glove raised up to cover the two small holes in the thick cloth.

When she lifted her hand from her eyes the street was still crowded with people and he was no longer standing in front of her. She was still standing there modestly. Under her shoulder, in the cavity between her arm and chest, was her leather handbag. It protruded through the thick cloth next to her left breast. She feels the touch as if it were electricity. Her mind recognises that it is only a leather handbag with nothing inside it except her purse and the small statue of stone. But the touch continues to run from her left breast like electricity.

She went home that day without her handbag. Without opening it, she threw it in a large dump. She didn't take anything from it. She even left her purse inside. She imagined that if she opened it she would see him. She had become afraid of seeing him. She didn't know why she was afraid. But she started to shake with fear. The fear accompanied her all the way home. She lay down on her bed. She realized that the handbag was no longer with her. She thought that the fear would leave her but it didn't. On the second day the fear continued to accompany her in the street, in the office, in the house, everywhere. It accompanied her like the trembling of a feverish person. One night her father heard her moaning in a low voice. Her body shook with the trembling like a person racked with malaria. Her father took her to the doctor. She took medicine for thirty days but the fever remained. At night her father heard her speaking to somebody as she said her prayers. He thought she was speaking to God, asking him forgiveness. But her voice became louder and her words became clearer. She was not talking to God. She was cursing the devil in words that could never come from the lips of a pure young woman. He believed that she had committed a sin that she was keeping to herself, not daring to reveal to anyone. He took her to a holy man people repent to of their sins. But after her repentance her fever continued. And once more the pills the doctor prescribed failed. When the director of the museum visited her she said she was not suffering from malaria but from a psychological condition. That's how she came to me.

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Translated by Ali Badran and Margot Badran.