

Women and Violence in the Forbidden Novel by Malika Mokeddem

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Abstract:

Violence is a serious psychological and social phenomenon that has existed in various societies throughout history in different forms and intensities. One of the most dangerous forms of violence is that directed at women, who are often viewed as the weakest link in society. This study explores the violence women face both within the family and from society at large. It presents two contrasting portrayals: the submissive woman who surrenders to her fate and is unable to defend herself, and the rebellious woman who rejects and confronts all forms of violence. Finally, the study highlights the psychological impact of violence on women, which often leads them to silence, revenge, or departure.

Keywords: violence against women, domestic violence, women's resistance, psychological impact of violence

1. Concept of Violence

The topic of violence has garnered significant attention from scholars and researchers in contemporary thought, taking precedence in various fields, particularly psychology and sociology. Violence is a concept examined by diverse disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and law. At its simplest, it is defined as "inflicting harm and damage on an individual or a group of people, with this harm being either physical, psychological, or moral, through various means, causing pain and losses or depriving individuals of symbolic and moral possessions." (1)

Violence always results in damage, which is usually either physical or moral, and its methods vary depending on the type of violence. Violence is also defined as "that extreme and unacceptable form of aggression aimed at causing harm, damage, and destruction to objects or properties." (2)

Violence represents a coercive force exercised by a person against others, causing fear, panic, and terror. The perpetrator uses severe cruelty to subject others to their authority and dominance. Violence is essentially a violation of the personality and a denial or disregard of others. (3)

The aforementioned concepts reveal that violence is a negative behavior involving harm to oneself or others, either physically or morally. It is an aggressive behavior governed by psychological and social motives.

Many researchers have attributed violence to psychological motives, with Sigmund Freud being one of the most prominent. Freud argued that humans are not naturally benevolent beings who only act in self-defense. Instead, humans inherently harbor a considerable amount of aggression and violence. According to Freud, every person naturally tends to exploit, use, and manipulate others to satisfy their physical or psychological needs. Thus, humans find satisfaction for their aggressive tendencies through exploiting or oppressing others. (4)

Freud's statement implies that violence is inherent in human nature. Humans are naturally violent, and their constant need for others leads them to use, exploit, and oppress others, making violence a natural aspect of life.

Others attribute violence to social factors, particularly proponents of the social theory, led by the Marxists. They believe that violence stems from class divisions, which inevitably lead to social conflicts, such as struggles over economic resources and social power. According to Marxists, violence does not belong to human nature; instead, it is a historical phenomenon. If the causes of violence, such as private property, are eliminated, peace and harmony will prevail. (5)

Regardless of whether the causes of violence are psychological or social, it remains a dangerous phenomenon that has existed since the beginning of humanity, threatening security and stability. Rather than working to reduce this phenomenon, we observe that methods of violence have evolved over the ages.

This evolution is often aimed at controlling others and regulating their social behavior. Despite appearing civilized and modern, humans have not been able to abandon their primitive, inherited ways of thinking, driven by the desire to obtain what they want. (6)

Violence against women is one form of violence that contradicts the religious values of society. Women are harmed due to their conflicts with others, often resulting from psychological, intellectual, social, or material incompatibilities. (7)

The Saharan Man's Treatment of Women

The way Saharan men treat women reflects male dominance and a persistent adherence to traditional customs that impose restrictions on women. These customs often deny women the right to education, confine them to household duties, and enforce submission to their husbands, stripping them of their basic rights. This dynamic declares the man's authority over women, demanding their obedience and submission. As the novel describes, "The Saharan street favors males, boldly revealing its blatant sexism against females, fueled by repressed frustrations and irrational behaviors." (8)

2. Manifestations of Violence in the Novel

A. Domestic Violence

Domestic violence refers to any form of physical, emotional, or psychological abuse inflicted by family members, relatives, or individuals within the family unit on other members, such as spouses, children, the elderly, and domestic workers. (9) This violence can take various forms, including verbal abuse like insults or physical abuse such as beating or even murder.

In the novel *The Forbidden Woman*, domestic violence is depicted in the fictional village of Ain Al-Nakhla, a desert community. The author illustrates the violence women endure from childhood.

Sultana: The protagonist of the novel experienced violence from a young age, living a miserable childhood after the village mayor incited discord between her parents. This suspicion ultimately led the father to abuse and kill the mother without verifying the truth.

The following narrative excerpt captures the confrontation between the husband and wife: *"What did they tell you this time? Don't you realize they are trying to ruin your life? Which neighbor was it this time?" He lunged at her. They quarreled, wrestled—kicks, blows, violent claws—until suddenly my mother fell, her head striking the stone mill.*" (10)

This scene demonstrates that women are the weakest link in society and are most vulnerable to harm. Merely casting doubt on a woman's behavior, without confirmation, led the man to resort to violence as a means of asserting his authority, even though there were alternative solutions. However, for men, violence often seems the easiest path.

The mother became a victim of a false rumor spread by a man who wanted to marry her but was rejected. She also became a victim of her husband's escalating violence, culminating in her death in front of her young daughter, who thus became a second victim of this violence.

This tragic scene portrays various forms of domestic violence and profoundly affects the child's psyche. The community did not empathize with her suffering but instead spread a rumor that her family was cursed. She eventually began to believe the rumor, as shown when she recalls, *"Whenever I walked through the alleys, children would run away as I approached. To escape all this, I crafted a bell for myself, dragging it behind me, tied with a string to an empty can. My eyes erased everything. I erased myself from the present... Within two days, everyone abandoned me. I grew up alone, devoid of appetite, chased like a tragic clown's spirit."* (11)

The violence had a profound impact on the child's psyche, leading her to feel isolated, empty, and orphaned at an early age. Her mother was killed, her father fled, and she lost all zest for life, succumbing to a sense of meaninglessness.

Effects of Violence and the Urge for Revenge

All this harm, frustration, and despair inevitably generate feelings of injustice, oppression, and resentment, which often lead to a desire for revenge.

Sultana was not the only victim of domestic violence. Dalila, a young girl, and her sister Samia also endured severe family abuse. Samia was frequently threatened with beating and even death by her male siblings for fleeing the household and deciding to pursue her education in France. Dalila, on the other hand, was tightly controlled to prevent her from following in Samia's footsteps. Her brothers forced her to work as their servant, believing that a woman's destiny is to serve men. Dalila recounts, *"They argue with me, even with my mother. They always tell me: don't go out, work with your mother... They scream and only know how to give orders. Sometimes they hit me."* (12)

Ali M'rabah's wife also suffered abuse because she only gave birth to daughters. She experienced severe bleeding, yet her husband refused to help her, saying, *"If I hate girls, why does she only give birth to girls? Let her drain that filthy blood."* (13) Tragically, the wife died due to her husband's neglect and indifference, merely for giving birth to female children.

B. Societal Violence

The novel also highlights societal violence against women, exposing the oppressive practices of authority figures who misuse their power for personal interests or to release psychological frustrations. The mayor, as the highest authority in Ain Al-Nakhla, exemplifies this abuse. Instead of ensuring peace and security in the area, he incites violence and uses it to exert control. He visits the hospital where Sultana works, hurling insults at her and even setting fire to her residence. His aggression escalates when he assigns a group of men to monitor her movements and eventually kill her.

The societal oppression becomes even more evident when the community neglects the orphaned child, failing to provide her with the emotional support she needs. The child laments: *"I walk all day to exhaust my desire... I never felt far from madness. Absurdity seemed the best way to face brutality. They called me the daughter of the accursed. I eventually recognized the strong protection that the label 'accursed' provided me for a long time. The word 'accursed' saved me from being stoned and other assaults."* (14)

This passage portrays a cruel and heartless society that failed to protect a vulnerable child. Instead, it forced her to find solace in a harsh and hurtful label, which ironically became her shield, as people feared coming near her to avoid the supposed curse.

3. Abused Women and the Desire for Rebellion

In Saharan society, patriarchal authority confines girls to their homes, depriving them of education and freedom. Their primary role is to serve family members. The author presents several female characters who embody both submission and rebellion against this oppressive reality.

Dalila represents a young girl with a passion for learning. Despite her father and brothers' opposition, she secretly visits a neighbor to acquire knowledge. Samia, her sister, refuses all marriage proposals and ultimately escapes to France to continue her studies, defying the outdated customs of her family.

Despite Sultana's harsh childhood, she finds a compassionate hand in a French doctor and his wife, who were working in the desert. They supported her, enrolled her in a boarding school, and provided care despite the community's accusations and ongoing efforts to drive them away from their workplace. Sultana later moves to France, where she pursues her studies and becomes a doctor.

Although she achieves her dreams, Sultana is haunted by an inner voice compelling her to return to her homeland. Upon returning to the desert after years of absence, she finds it unchanged. She questions the reasons for her return: Is it nostalgia, a desire for revenge against those who wronged her, or an attempt to change the oppressive norms against women?

After her return, Sultana is appointed as a doctor at a clinic, replacing a deceased physician with whom she had a love relationship. His death marks the beginning of her confrontation with societal norms. She defies traditions by insisting on attending his funeral and going to the cemetery—a practice forbidden for women in her community. Despite opposition, she asserts her determination, saying, *"We'll see who can stop me from entering."* (15)

Sultana's Confrontation with Society

Upon her return, Sultana faced societal opposition and scrutiny at every step. Whenever she met with her friends Fensane or the doctor in the same house, the community reacted violently. They bombarded her with insults, surrounded her house, shattered its windows, and even attempted to set it on fire and assassinate her. The community remained oblivious to her painful past—the orphan who witnessed her mother's murder and endured a childhood of homelessness, labeled as "accursed."

Sultana's childhood tragedy left a deep impact on her psyche. As a young girl without protection, she was vulnerable to accusations of sin and immorality in a community where outdated traditions and malicious rumors prevailed.

Identity and Societal Stagnation

After extensive investigations, the community finally discovered Sultana's true identity. However, she also realized that their identity and mindset remained unchanged. She recalls only their laughter, hints, and insults:

"My return here allows me to be filled once again with their pains, sighs, their abysses of sorrow, and their piercing gazes... Even though I know that memories weigh heavily on my mind, more than the futility of their memory." (16)

The violence inflicted upon Sultana had a profound psychological impact. It instilled a deep and lingering pain within her, which eventually transformed into resentment and hatred toward the society that wronged her.

"I had to carry within me a strong charge of hatred to resist and stay here. Hatred lifts you, ignites you, anchors you, and arms you. Under its influence, you defend yourself and retaliate. The absence of hatred leaves you with only one solution—escape and wandering... I have been fragmented since childhood, and with age and exile, my condition has worsened." (17)

This passage portrays the psychological turmoil of a woman filled with bitterness and anger, a consequence of a society that robbed her of her childhood and innocence. Sultana's story serves as a model for the harsh reality of women in this community.

Solidarity Among Women and Resistance

Sultana's strength, determination, and courage in facing the oppressive society inspired the women of the village. They stood by her and confronted the mayor, hurling insults and holding him accountable for everything that happened to Sultana, from planting seeds of doubt in her father's mind to spreading malicious rumors. They also reminded him of how he abused and abandoned his own women. The women declared, *"Sultana is unstoppable; she is a free and educated woman."* (18)

In a remarkable show of support, the women decided to form an association to safeguard their rights, with Sultana as its president. They recognized that direct confrontation with a patriarchal and brutal society was challenging, so they chose the paths of knowledge, work, and financial independence as their means of liberation from male dominance.

The Burden of Male Hegemony

The patriarchal society, with its dominance and denial of women's rights, instilled a sense of resentment and pressure that eventually led to an explosion. Sultana reflects:

"If officials worked on changing mentalities, perhaps I would have calmed down and been engulfed in oblivion. But the present state of the country and the fate of women here constantly remind me of my past tragedy. The persecutions and humiliations they suffer affect me and ignite my pains. Distance does not weaken anything. Pain is the strong bond between humans, stronger than all hatreds." (19)

The novel effectively highlights the plight of women subjected to violence in Saharan society, where abuse begins in childhood, driven by the belief that women exist solely to serve men. It also sheds light on the struggle of women deprived of basic rights such as education and employment. Despite the hardships and bitter struggles, Sultana's story culminates in her courageous return to her homeland.

As one critic aptly notes: *"It is natural for the estranged self to think of returning to its roots, seeking warmth among family and friends, and finding inner cohesion and psychological reassurance within a familiar cultural and traditional environment."* (20)

Upon returning to her homeland, the writer is confronted with an unchanged society still shackled by outdated customs and traditions. Her memories take her back to past years, making recollection and stream of consciousness a defining feature of her narrative style. She immerses herself in the pulse of memory through vivid scenes, flashbacks, and introspective monologues that narrate her story, history, and current reality. Through these, she constructs a bridge between the past and what should be. (21)

To sum up, the author shapes her narrative through the act of recalling and drawing on memory, allowing her to speak about herself, her environment, and her desire for freedom and escape from restrictions.

Although memory is an essential part of identity, the writer remains captive to it, as it embodies her past. She has an overwhelming need for expression, struggling with feelings of loneliness, isolation, and fear. Her openness to the past leads her to delve deep into her inner world, unburdening herself of its weight.

Sultana had the potential to heal from her painful past, but the persistence of oppression and injustice left her wounds unhealed. Faced with the grim realization that change was almost impossible, she decided to leave her homeland and return to France.

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