

“A Madman Who Does Not Love Me”:

The Portrayal of Men in the Work of Emirati Poet Maysoon Saqr

Mohammad Hamad¹

In women's literature, whether poetry or prose, portrayals of women and portrayals of men are central themes. Feminist writers have adopted attacks on men as a means of defence, and those attacks can take on an overtly hostile character.

Men are often depicted as mad, sexually impotent, bestial predatory upon women, clownish, traitorous, and mendacious.

This study aims to elucidate the manifestations of these negative characterizations and the way they are manifested in Emirati poet Maysoon Saqr's collection, *A Madman Who Does Not Love Me*.

The conclusions drawn point to these characterizations being a reflection of a patriarchal system and a negative social praxis in which religion and customs conspire to constrict the freedom and creativity of women, notably married ones.

Keywords: Women's literature, Emirati poetry, depiction of men, depiction of women, patriarchy.

Preface

Writing on women's issues rose to prominence in the early Twentieth century as the struggle for sexual equality emerged and the term 'feminist literature' was coined. Many female writers became renowned in this field, including Nawal al-Sa'dawi, Laila al-Othman, Souad al-Sabah, and Salwa al-Neimi. What was distinctive about feminist literature was its advocacy of rebellion against, and liberation from the restrictions of male-dominated society, demanding sexual equality and justice in a variety of fields. It was also a struggle against the

¹ Al-Qasemi Academy.

manifestations of male violence, persecution, and repression. Women's opinions were marginalized, and their creative writing capabilities belittled. They were treated without respect and denied opportunities for education, employment, and their own choice of profession. Their role was confined to pregnancy and childrearing. Men sought to enslave women and define their role as inferior since.

They do not possess the human sentiment that equips them for independence, or there being any capacity to accept opinion outside of social and Islamic customs applying to women.

The male-dominated system has hegemonized society as a whole, but especially women themselves. Hence female cries of protest remain in most countries of the world, demanding complete freedom and true equality, whereby women can participate in the leading professions and political positions and not simply be cultural adornment. (al-Qadi, 1992: 207)

Arab women writers endured attacks from critics who derided their literary capabilities. This ignited a literary revolution in which female writers fought to defend their work and demand equal treatment. They launched attacks on men, portraying them in all kinds of negative ways and treating them as the principal cause of women's suffering in society.

Maysoon Saqr's collection *A Madman Who Does Not Love Me* is distinctive in its incorporation of a number of negative image schemata applied to men, indicating her feminist outlook. By contrast, there are positive portrayals of men by non-feminist women poets, notably in Egypt (ash-Shari'i, 2006), somewhere Saqr has spent a large part of her life. Saqr deploys a variety of images in her poetry to characterize men, as set out below.

1. *Man as mad*

The image of the madman appears in the title of the collection, and here it seems the man can only be described as such because he does not love the female protagonist. Later, the image of the madman reappears in the eponymous poem "A Madman Who Does Not Love Me," where Saqr writes:

A mad man
who does not love me
my dissolution does not burden him
I am the tree
and not the fruit

(Saqr, 2010: 53)

Here, it seems, the woman is wedded to her love for the man, but suffers because the man ignores her, does not care that she is liquefying in her love for him. The noun-phrase "a madman" seems separate from the predicate clause "who does not love me" in a way that differs from that found in the collection's title. Hence it lends it a further nuance: that the ties of passion between the man and woman have been entirely severed.

The woman describes herself as a tree, the symbol of femininity and fertility. It does not wither, retains its verdure, and is a symbol of power and eternal wholeness; some peoples have worshipped trees as such. The poet uses this image to portray the woman's faith in herself as "a complete human" who hence deserves to have the man love her. This, in turn, indicates the man's madness in that he does not love her despite her wholeness. He is mad because he does not love her as she has loved him.

The woman's love for the man is evinced further on in the same poem:

You are cruel and I am cruel
The difference is vast too
It is an impulse from the love I bear

(Saqr, 2010: 58)

The rebellious character of the poet is intertextually evinced by contrast with the Adam and Eve story, where the tree is Eve's method of seduction that leads to the couple's expulsion from paradise. Here Saqr wishes to use the tree in a new sense, as the source, not the fruit, of seduction.

The female protagonist in the poem denies being such "fruit": "I am the tree and not the fruit." This is to say that she is a tree that is still flourishing and complete, not a piece of fruit that love and relationships may rot. This points to the ignorance of the male protagonist and his inability to distinguish between a tree that provides constant pleasure and fruit, which furnishes pleasure of a temporary sort. He is unable to make such a distinction because he is a madman ('Abd-al-Muttalib, 2003: 77).

2. *Man as sexually impotent*

The poet conceives of male characters as sexually impotent, addressing their masculinity and virility as a powerful attribute. Thus, the man is less than a tiger in the poem "A Madman Who Does Not Love Me." Saqr writes:

I fall with my feathered wings
each day
onto your plane
where wings do not gather
I cannot attain your heart
I thought you a prince on a white steed
flirting with colourful butterflies

and I reckoned you a tiger extinguishing its day by night

(Saqr, 2010: 46-47)

In other words, the speaker says she is giving up her freedom and many other things for the man she loves. Yet the man does not value this, so the poet states that everything that she has given up is not enough for him. Here we see the man's torment of the woman, since he is not satisfied with all she has done for him. A picture emerges of the man's 'cruel mistreatment,' a concept deployed by many writers of feminist literature.

The writer ends by saying that she was deceived by this man for she thought him gentle and kind: "I thought you a prince on a white steed," as she puts it. The expression "flirting with colourful butterflies" relates the prince and the white horse to ideas of purity and of dreams, with colored butterflies associated with serenity and gentleness. Then she thinks of him as a tiger who has extinguished his day with night, making him less than, or lower than a tiger. Here the writer suggests he is sexually impotent, since the tiger is a symbol of virility and power, with great sexual potency. Arab legend has it that the sexually potent have a "tiger's penis." The female protagonist had hoped that this man was different.

Taha suggests that the woman may be depicted as the man's sister, with a wife becoming a sibling, making sexual congress immoral, not only the result of sexual impotency, but due to the divide between them (2006: 40-45).

Laila al-Othman, in her novels *The Silence of the Butterflies* (*Samt al-Firashat*) and *The Coccyx* (*Al-'As'as*), focuses on sexual impotency in men and the rapaciousness of masculinity with the aim of laying the character of the Arab male bare (Majadilah, 2011: 105).

In a study on the depiction of men in Egyptian feminist cinema, however, a contradictory image emerges where men are portrayed sometimes as possessing the ultimate in virility and at other times as sexually impotent (Zahran, 2015: 71-72).

3. *Man as animal/beast*

Men are sometimes described in feminist literature, particularly in novels and short stories, as animals. Saqr pursues this in her poetry too. Thus, in the poem “Dividing Walls,” she writes:

It is not humiliating to return home alone
after raking the garden with your memory
you did not bring oranges
nor a betrayed wife you killed in your sleep
all you have done is no longer valid today
you do not have obvious enemies
because they are like hunting dogs
like a flitting hour
you do not calculate how much damage you have been caused
but you will die baring your fangs
like a blind guard dog

(Saqr, 2010: 94-95)

Here, the poet targets men’s treachery and relentless pursuit of women. The garden may symbolize where women are gathered as the source of fruit (that is, pleasure). Despite men's eternal chasing after women, they do not gather oranges, that is the women in this situation. Women here are compared to fruit that is hard to pluck. His efforts end in failure this time around.

This man is also distinctive in his lack of enemies. Saqr then compares him to a hunting dog and a passing hour. The other hunting dogs represent other males who may compete with him for the woman, yet the man is able to tame them, since they are hunting dogs, making them represent no threat to him. The comparison of men with hunting dogs here relies implicitly on the association of women with prey, and feminist literature often refers to men as beasts, correspondingly placing women in the role of their victim.

The poet uses the hour that passes as a simile for the hunting dogs. Hunting dogs are possessed of speed, meaning they are just beings flitting through this man’s life.

The poet also describes the man here as a blind guard dog that dies with his fangs bared. He remains as if blind to the garden around him, to reality, and is unable to understand the truth of what he is guarding. He is ignorant and incapable of distinguishing between such things, thus completing the meaning intended by the poet in the title, “A Madman Who Does Not Love Me.” The man that is incapable of distinguishing between a tree and its fruit is, indeed, a madman.

Finally, the poet describes the man in her poem “In His Place” as a wolf. She says:

He took his place and sat
his hand on the breasts of a young woman
I rubbed out his hand
and I drew an orange in its place
he smiled
I rubbed out his lips
and drew a sun
I tore up the picture

and he stayed in his place
a wolf gnawing on his past.

(Saqr, 2010: 199-120)

This poem describes a picture the poet is drawing of the man who is fondling a young woman's breasts just for the pleasure of it. The woman rubs out his hand and draws an orange in its place. The orange is comparable to the woman's breasts and the artist tries to illustrate the mistake the man is making in touching the woman's breasts only for his pleasure. Despite this, the man does not realize his mistake and smiles instead. The artist, therefore, rubs out the smiling lips and puts a sun in their place. The sun's brightness represents the evident truth and she tears up the picture in its vividness. Yet, with every effort made by the artist to demonstrate to the man the mistake he is making, the man does not care and continues with what he is doing, remaining in his place like a predator wolf that chews up its past and repeats the same mistake over and over.

The description of the man as a wolf and that of treachery intersects with Lola al-Sayyid's study of the portrayal of men in work of Pakistani poet Parveen Shakir, where the imagery is similar (al-Sayyid, 2015: 362-364).

This characterization is also consistent with what Ibrahim Taha says about the depiction of men in many modern feminist literary works as beasts who treat women inhumanely and betray them. They are described as animals, beasts, particularly as dogs (Taha, 2006: 36-40).

This further resembles the characterization of men in a number of Nawal al-Sa'dawi's short stories, where sarcasm is deployed to attack men using animal imagery (Khatir, 2009: 131-132); by generalized extension, this applies to all men, thus Muhammad, Husayn, Fawzi, Ibrahim, and Biyoumi are all dogs (Assadi and Abu Reesh, 2015: 33).

4. *Man as predator upon women*

Saqr, on several occasions, broadens her negative depiction of men through portraying them as predators upon women. In the poem “In His Place,” the man is depicted as a wolf that stalks women for the pure pleasure of it. As already indicated, the poet attempts to reform reality and educate the man.

In the poem “Clapperboards – First Time,” we find:

With consummate skill itself
he shines his fangs
he takes you by surprise like submissive prey.

(Saqr, 2010:148)

These lines depict the man as a predatory creature, thoroughly scrubbing his fangs and readying himself to descend upon the woman who is depicted as his prey, a victim that is helpless to do anything about its fate.

In the same work we find the poet saying:

Tell him: You almost choke me when you try to kiss me
make a red rose of your face
it is not enough to be embarrassed
make your heart something to hang on the wall of his house
like a rose on a white shirt
that he will count the petals of with your fingers
you will become embarrassed
it will become obvious that he is deluding you
it will become obvious that you are implicated
as you press your mouth close
to choke yourself more this time

(Saqr, 2010: 148)

These lines show the man deceiving the woman, trying to make her submit and become his possession in order to make of her what he wishes. Here is the image of man as the predator upon women, the crude brute that ravishes women and deprives them of their rights, who cares nothing about their opinions or feelings, concerning himself only with satisfying his own pleasures and treating women like his own chattels.

The poet urges resistance to the man's treatment of the woman. She says to the woman: Resist! Express your opinion! Demonstrate your annoyance at the way he acts! Put yourself to the fore and impose your viewpoint! Then he will seem to show he cares about you, but, in the end, he is just a tyrant, a liar, and an exploiter.

In "Dividing Walls," we find the man shown as eternal predator, combing his garden with his memory to seek out women and pluck oranges or other fruits. As already mentioned, the poet places significant emphasis on the conduct of the man, depicting him as a blind guard dog who knows nothing of the garden and who is incapable of distinguishing between truth and falsehood.

This characterization of the male personality intersects with a study on the depiction of men in Jordanian feminist literature in which man is described as a pointless opportunist who does not esteem women at their true value and has no respect for women's feelings (Shannar, 2013: 140)

5. *Man as master clown*

Saqr describes the man as a clown in her poem "The Wound's Scream":

In his new attire
the clown with painted face
that melts in pain
hopes to make the crowd laugh

and succeed in his role

(Saqr, 2010: 114)

The clown in this poem is a person of many masks who successfully disguises his true feelings about others. He is clever in concealing his true personality. Saqr’s description continues:

In his old attire
returning from the sea
he throws fish upon the shore
and counts his salty wounds
as for the serving maids
they polish mirrors
we can see their faces in
their faces that do not reflect back to them
when they look
they reflect only a shaft of pain
that descends from above
as we see the wound’s scream
in those miserable examples

(Saqr, 2010: 115-116)

Here, the writer addresses the feelings of men towards women. Thus, the fisherman trawls the sea for fish (that is, women) and the image again is one of men as predators upon females. The man then throws the fish on the beach after he has gotten what he needs from them. He subsequently returns to his palace where he exercises his lordly authority over serving maids who have lost sight of their faces in the mirror because they have become mere objects of his pleasure.

His lordly status represents ownership, and it is through this ownership that he can practice his calling as a lothario both within and outside the home. Thus, he is a clown because of his many masks. Susan Naji says that there is a difference between someone possessing power and someone himself being the power. The power of the man in this situation is not a rationally derived one, based on skills and capabilities; it is an irrationally based power founded on strength, something underpinned by patriarchy (Naji, 2006:54).

Manal al-‘Isa, citing examples from Saudi short stories, describes the lordly authority of man using the term oppression, exercised through his authority within the family, whether as husband, father, or brother (al-‘Isa, 2002: 14-21).

6. *Man as traitor*

The image of the man as traitor is reflected in the poem “Maybe God Hears Him”:

Do not fear, humble peasant woman
on your feet a transient trace
and till the end of the day
you guide your plough
and cry out to your bull
sowing wheat seeds
then colouring your eyes with kohl and dressing up
while the pious man that rapes you
revelling in the effects of his inanities
climbs mountains
he is not suffocated by severe teachings
and does not bring any fears into his prayers.

(Saqr, 2010: 176-177)

The writer here speaks of a working woman, industrious in her labours. She symbolizes the traditional woman who spends all day working then also prettifying herself at night for her husband. Saqr here addresses a major social issue and that is the superficial understanding of religion that is applied in a dry, lifeless way. The pious man symbolizes the religious person who climbs mountains to practice his religious rites after raping the woman, preying upon her and treating her in a way contrary to that religion. Thus, he becomes a mockery of a religious man incapable of understanding the precepts of that religion properly. Saqr continues:

Yet the washing he performs to cleanse himself
after every ritual impurity
when he puts out all his candles
and sleeps a satisfied soul
the sound of prayers rises over him
the sound of the flute fading
he sits waiting/praying until night
and returns trembling
the full moon will appear
maybe God will hear him, and talk with him
and perhaps you may fall down by the dagger in the sheath of his
betrayal.

(Saqr, 2010: 178-179)

The man is incapable of seeing religion's real essence. Whoever treats women in this fashion is unable to perceive his mistakes, so he cleanses himself as if they never happened, and sleeps in self-satisfaction, incapable of understanding his wrongdoing. Meanwhile the sound of prayers and the flute

(the soul that is) remains unheard to this diminished being who needs to hear it.

When the pious man spends his night in prayer and is cleansed so that he has the potential for regret and to understand the wrongs he has done to the woman, the moon turns into a bright light to reveal his errors, with God ready to hear him repent.

The poet then addresses the woman and tells her that things may change for the better or they may get worse.

The dagger in literature symbolizes treachery and betrayal. This is a warning to the woman that the man may betray her if the situation remains the same. Here we see the depiction of the man as traitor and an exposition on an issue of utmost relevance to the principal reasons for women's suffering in society.

The image of man as traitor correlates with that found in a number of Egyptian novels and short stories that present the lover as a betrayer, largely through sexual scenarios, to emphasize that treachery is prototypical for Middle Eastern men (Idris, 2015: 19-20).

In the Saudi short story too, he is described as worthless, essentially a cheat in his marital relationships and a frequenter of suspicious liaisons (al-'Isa, 2002: 32). Such sexual encounters are not restricted to women, but extend to homosexual relationships, as depicted by Laila al-Othman (Saffori, 2004: 33).

7. *Man as liar*

Saqr also pursues her negative portrayal of men through describing him as a lie-monger whenever he has the opportunity to be one. In the poem "A Madman Who Does Not Love Me," we find:

Travel is hung on the hook
a seller of lies at his daily departure

Travel is always an opportunity for the man; it is like clothing hanging from coat-hooks, ready for use at any time. Thus, a purveyor of lies is ready to deceive at any turn of events and for any reason. In this way, Saqr describes man as a seller of lies, using falsehood as a means to a number of ends, going about his daily business using his mendacity whenever he has the opportunity to do so. Saqr describes a type of man here who spends his time traveling from one place to another, angling after women, looking for entertainment. Along the way, he sells lies and false promises, betraying the women he encounters. Naji, providing evidence for it from the short stories of Jadhbiya Sidqi and Jamila al-‘Alayli, describes this type of man as a womanizer because of the number of relationships he has with females. He has disregard for women's thoughts, for their very being, and he uses trickery, and avoids commitment (Naji, 2006: 154).

Conclusion

Emirati poet Maysoon Saqr presents an unequivocal picture of the love relationships between women and men. Men are systematically presented in negative lights and as playing negative roles, demonstrating her adherence to a familiar viewpoint of feminist literature. Saqr portrays women as victims of male injustice and the prevalence of patriarchy as the basis for a number of negative emotions, like anger, sadness, and pain. Her narrative of male authority is a means of self-defence, using such a critique as a weapon to preserve her position in a zero-sum game, with no silence on the topic possible after that point.

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