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Liberation or Assimilation: The Paradox of Female Agency in Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*

Abstract. This article examines Ahdaf Soueif's novel, *In the Eye of the Sun*, to explore the complex dynamics of female agency and sexuality within the context of Arab-Islamic societal norms. Through the lens of anti-sex feminism, particularly the theories of Andrea Dworkin and Catherine Mackinnon, the study scrutinizes the protagonist Asya's seemingly rebellious actions, such as her premarital sexual relationship with Saif and extramarital affair with Gerald. Contrary to surface interpretations of these acts as defiance, the analysis reveals that Asya's choices often reinforce rather than subvert patriarchal structures. The article situates Asya's personal journey within the socio-political and cultural milieu of late-twentieth-century Egypt, highlighting how colonial legacies and societal expectations shape her experiences. By integrating critical perspectives on gender and sexuality, this study underscores the paradox of Asya's quest for liberation, which ultimately entangles her further within the confines of traditional gender roles. The article concludes by examining Asya's eventual turn to societal work, suggesting that her actions reflect strategic adaptations rather than genuine autonomy. This nuanced reading challenges simplistic narratives of female emancipation and emphasizes the enduring influence of cultural and religious roots in shaping individual agency.

Keywords: Anti-sex feminism, female agency, Arab women writers, diaspora literature, Arab feminism

1. Introduction

Within the field of Arab literary scholarship, individual choices concerning female agency and sexuality are often celebrated as unequivocal acts of liberation. However, a closer examination may offer a more complex reality. Ahdaf Soueif's acclaimed novel, *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992), exemplifies this complexity by delving into the interplay between personal desires and the societal constraints that bind women. Soueif's work transcends simplistic narratives of defiance,

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prompting critical engagement with the question: to what extent do individual actions truly subvert, or conversely, inadvertently reinforce the very patriarchal system they challenge? This article examines the seemingly rebellious pursuit of sexual freedom undertaken by Asya, the novel's protagonist. Drawing on the work of feminist theorists such as Andrea Dworkin, Luce Irigaray, and Catharine MacKinnon, it argues that Asya's journey, far from representing a straightforward declaration of liberation, reveals a deeper and more complex negotiation with, and ultimately, an internalization of, patriarchal norms. This internalization manifests in the form of Asya's pursuit of sexual liberation, becoming a paradox, and ultimately trapping her in a system that undermines the very freedom she seeks.

Soueif's novel unfolds against the backdrop of a late-twentieth-century Egypt in flux. It introduces Asya al-Ulama, a brilliant and ambitious young woman navigating a complex web of societal expectations. Her traditional family envisions a marriage adhering to established norms, but Asya exhibits a rebellious streak from an early age, hinting at potential conflicts between personal aspirations and familial obligations. Defying Arab Islamic teachings, she initiates a premarital sexual relationship with Saif Madi, a fellow university student she meets during her undergraduate studies. Though initially successful and supportive, their eventual marriage lacks emotional intimacy and intellectual engagement, leaving Asya yearning for more. Seeking a path beyond societal constraints, Asya embarks on graduate study in England, where she encounters the enigmatic Gerald Stone. Drawn to his intellectual spark, Asya engages in a passionate affair that disrupts her world. While this relationship allows her to explore her sexuality and independence, it is fraught with manipulation and power struggles. Asya even explores the world of sex toys, a symbolic attempt to reclaim control over her own body and identity. The novel concludes with a pivotal decision. Asya leaves both men behind, returning to Egypt with a newfound sense of self, where she throws herself into community work.

In exploring Soueif's novel, it is vital to contextualize the analysis within the rich tapestry of Egypt's socio-political and cultural milieu during the second half of the twentieth century, a period extensively referenced in the novel. As Amin Malak explains, throughout the novel, Soueif "integrates the private history of a woman and her family with the political history of the nation between the years 1967 and 1980" (130). This era was characterized by significant upheavals, including the aftermath of the Six-Day War in 1967, the October War of 1973, and the evolving peace process with Israel, all of which profoundly shaped the nation's identity and societal norms (Oren 305–328). In addition, although Egypt gained formal independence from British colonial rule in 1952, the legacies of colonialism continued to influence the nation's political, social, and cultural landscape. The persistent economic dependency, the struggle for political sovereignty, and the imposition of Westernized social norms contributed to an ongoing sense of neocolonial influence. This colonial legacy affected gender roles, societal expectations, and notions of autonomy, resonating throughout Asya's narrative. As the analysis will reveal, the intersections between sexuality, power, and colonial influences provide insight into how Asya's personal struggles mirror broader themes of domination and oppression.

Furthermore, the novel's backdrop in Egypt, a society steeped in patriarchal norms and defined expectations regarding female behavior and sexuality, significantly shapes Asya's experiences. As Jihan Zakarriya argues, towards the second half of the twentieth century, a sentiment prevailed among many Egyptians that the West acted as "a single, monolithic enemy, plotting against Egyptian people and their culture" (48). This fostered tension between Egyptian tradition and Western liberalism, a theme central to the novel. As a defense mechanism, some Egyptians sought to seclude their women, aiming to preserve Arab and Muslim traditions in the face of perceived Western encroachment. This societal context informs Asya's journey through personal rebellion and sexual exploration, which is profoundly influenced by the cultural and societal norms imposed on Egyptian women. Understanding this context is paramount for unraveling the intricacies of her actions, which, though seemingly defiant, are interwoven with the very patriarchal mindset she endeavors to challenge. Additionally, Asya's moral and cultural quandaries, stemming from exposure to both Arab and Western influences, mirror the broader societal tensions faced by Egyptians amidst significant social and political transformations. This dual exposure adds layers to Asya's pursuit of autonomy, challenging the oversimplified dichotomy of liberation versus oppression.

A significant strand of critical scholarship celebrates Asya's pursuit of sexual autonomy as a definitive act of liberation. This body of research highlights Soueif's exploration of female autonomy and the right to bodily self-determination. Shikoh Mohsin Mirza's analysis, for instance, examines Asya's complex character, portraying her as a figure who boldly resists the constraints imposed by a patriarchal society that views women's independence as a threat and shrouds their bodies in shame. He argues that Asya's deliberate defiance of gender roles is not just an act of rebellion but a valiant pursuit of personal freedom. Mirza posits that Soueif crafts Asya's character as a champion for individual liberation, one who is determined enough to articulate her desires openly and challenge the oppressive cultural norms. As Mirza articulates, Soueif "transforms [Asya] into a radical anarchist so that she is wilful enough to voice her desire," highlighting the character's extreme stance against the established social order (14).

Echoing the themes identified by Mirza, Nada Ayad probes deeper, exploring Asya's sexuality as a potent weapon against societal constraints and a triumphant symbol of liberation. Ayad highlights Asya's response to pregnancy as a conscious rejection of the societal pressure to procreate within a pre-defined marriage system. For Asya, Ayad argues, heterosexuality transcends mere biological function; it is a powerful expression of personal desire and emotional connection. Furthermore, Ayad suggests Soueif portrays Asya as defying the traditional expectation of marriage as a path to financial security. Instead, Asya prioritizes sexual compatibility in a relationship, a stance that challenges conservative Arab-Islamic values but also potentially (232–35).

Expanding on existing scholarship, Elsayed Ahmed investigates Asya's challenge to societal sexual norms, particularly through her extramarital affair with Gerald. He views this not just as a pivotal moment in her sexual awakening, but as a catalyst for her entire journey towards liberation. While the audacity of the affair itself is significant, Ahmed further emphasizes the

revolutionary act of openly discussing it with her mother. This flies in the face of cultural taboos surrounding female sexuality and demonstrates Asya's unwavering willingness to challenge deeply ingrained societal expectations. Ahmed further analyzes Asya's firm claim to privacy when confronted by her mother. He interprets this not just as a desire for secrecy, but as a powerful assertion of her independence and control over her personal life (117–25). Ultimately, Ahmed's analysis adds another layer of understanding to Asya's complex rebellion, highlighting the importance of open communication and self-assertion in her fight for sexual autonomy.

While predominant critical interpretations frame Asya's choices as a direct challenge to Egypt's entrenched patriarchal norms, this article proposes a different perspective. Offering a more nuanced interpretation of the role of sexuality in the text, the article contends that Asya's pursuit of sexual fulfillment, while ostensibly counter-hegemonic, may ultimately be circumscribed by, and potentially even reinforce, the very structures it seeks to subvert. Through a rigorous examination of Asya's narrative, this article explores how societal expectations and established power dynamics constrain the possibilities for her defiance to exist entirely outside of the patriarchal framework.

2. Analysis

Examining Asya's sexual liberation through the lens of Arab-Islamic social norms reveals a nuanced reality. A cornerstone of this system is the concept of virginity, traditionally considered a fundamental element of a woman's honor and social standing. Lama Abu Odeh sheds light on this concept, highlighting its connection to the "honor/shame" framework that dictates female sexuality:

The discourse on gender and the discourse on virginity in Arab culture overlap so broadly that they are hardly distinguishable. To be an Arab woman is to engage in daily practices, an important part of which is to be a virgin. A heterosexuality that is honor/shame-based such as the Arab one, demands, under the sanction of social penalty, that the performance of femaleness stylizes the body that is called female as virginal. The hymen, in this context, acquires the double function of being both a mark of virginity and of delineating the boundaries of the body that is called female. (917)

On the surface, Asya appears to challenge this cultural emphasis placed on virginity. Her desire for penetration from Saif before marriage seemingly signifies a bold rejection of the societal construct that equates a woman's worth solely with her virginity and its connection to family honor. However, a closer examination reveals a more intricate dynamic. Before this encounter with Saif, Asya is involved with Umberto, an Italian boxer. While initially rejecting his sexual advances, she ultimately accepts on the condition of preserving her virginity. This conditional acceptance suggests that Asya's willingness to lose her virginity with Saif stems from her expectation of eventual marriage, rather than constituting a complete defiance of societal norms. Ultimately, her behavior exemplifies an adaptation to the very system she appears to contest.

Asya's pursuit of sexual exploration outside of marriage adds another dimension to her purported defiance of societal norms. Zahra Al-Saqqaf's analysis underscores the gravity of Asya's actions within her social context. Al-Saqqaf aptly emphasizes the paramount importance of wifely fidelity in Arab culture, particularly the severe consequences women face for transgressing these boundaries. As Al-Saqqaf states,

For an Arab woman who internalizes the values of Arab culture, committing adultery means not only infidelity and disloyalty to her husband and disgrace to her family's honor but also distortion of her selfhood and inner integrity as an individual who has autonomy and agency to decide her moral being and stand solid against challenges, temptations, loneliness, deprivation, etc. (48)

Despite this societal understanding, Asya's actions deviate from the normative perspective. When her marital intimacy fails to meet her desires, she seeks alternative avenues, engaging in an extramarital affair with Gerald. Yet, rather than embodying a sense of empowerment in this transgression, Asya grapples with internal turmoil. Fully aware of the societal constraints imposed on her sexuality as a married woman within Arab-Islamic norms, she finds herself torn between desire and the weight of cultural expectations. This internal conflict is evident right after her initial encounter with Gerald. Soueif captures this dissonance through Asya's self-reproach:

You've committed adultery, you've done it ... But he's going away anyway in three weeks—can't I enjoy him for those three weeks and then let him go for ever? Asya nods at herself in the mirror: she would think these were the arguments of a whore What are you, a modern woman? You are an Arab, a Muslim, if the law of your people were applied you would be stoned to death—but would she? You are only stoned to death if you are a *muhasanah* ... No, she would not be stoned ... And besides, the door of repentance is always open. (638–39)

Asya's internal conflict unveils the enduring influence of Arab values within her psyche. She harshly judges her own justifications for infidelity, labeling them as those of a "whore," indicating the deeply ingrained moral code stemming from her Arab background. Moreover, her contemplations demonstrate a continued adherence to Islamic tradition, notably referencing the Islamic verdict on adultery for married individuals, which prescribes stoning to death (Ngema and Iyer 11). She even utilizes the classical Islamic term *muhasanah*, which denotes the status of a married woman within classical Islamic tradition, underscoring her ongoing connection to her religious heritage. Additionally, her consideration of repentance suggests a lingering desire to reconcile her actions with her religious beliefs. This introspective struggle highlights Asya's inability to entirely sever ties with her cultural and religious roots, even as she grapples with personal desires that appear to contradict them, thus revealing her actions to be less audacious than they might seem.

Delving deeper into Asya's interactions with Saif and Gerald, the two men who significantly impact her life, exposes further complexities within her situation. Despite their contrasting cultural

backgrounds, both men exhibit a concerning similarity in their interactions with Asya, perpetuating a power imbalance that restricts her autonomy. Highlighting the similar patriarchal view of the two men despite their distinct cultural backgrounds, Elsayed Ahmed notes: “Gerald Stone is blonde where Saif is dark. Yet, like Saif, he looks upon her as a female and not a person to be taken seriously” (127). This recurring pattern suggests Asya’s struggle extends beyond the personalities of these men. Instead, it points to a deeper, more systemic force that limits her agency. A deeper examination of her encounters with the two men reveals how their behaviors reflect the consistency of some patriarchal views that transcends the cultural divide between East and West.

The persistence of identical patriarchal control wielded by both men finds thematic resonance in the narrative’s exploration of the power dynamics embedded within the act of naming. Both Saif and Gerald consistently employ alternative appellations when addressing Asya, a phenomenon accentuated by her frustrated inquiry directed towards Gerald: “Why don’t you ever use my name?” (Soueif 865). Notably, Gerald’s sole utterance of her name coincides with the climax of their sexual encounter. This detail resonates deeply with Asya and potentially influences her comparative preference for him over Saif. As Marta Cariello observes, the various names bestowed upon Asya function as instruments of manipulation within the patriarchal societal framework. These imposed monikers ultimately serve to objectify Asya, reducing her solely to a sexualized entity and reinforcing her position within a male-dominated society:

Asya’s name and identity seem to be defined and assigned time and again by male characters from different relational positions as well as by history, and by the geopolitics of domination. Asya’s body filters the interpretations she receives. All the names she is given, whether ‘princess’, ‘baby’, or ‘man’, leave her a stranger to what she truly is, very much like the orders she is instructed to obey: to be a statue, or else to be exotically erotic. (319–320)

The names imposed upon Asya and their impact on her identity are emblematic of a broader power dynamic, one that mirrors the pervasive nexus between sex and colonization. Andrea Dworkin, a renowned anti-sex feminist, draws parallels between the power dynamics inherent in heterosexual sex and those embedded within colonial relationships. Challenging the prevailing narrative of heterosexual sex as inherently liberating for women, Dworkin posits that “the political meaning of intercourse for women is the fundamental question of feminism and freedom” (156). Dworkin dismantles the notion of empowerment embedded within traditional conceptions of heterosexual sex, revealing instead a system of power that privileges the masculine. For her, women involved in heterosexual sex are essentially “occupied” and “invaded.” By contesting the notion that heterosexual intercourse is inherently liberating, Dworkin suggests that women who equate intercourse with freedom unintentionally perpetuate systems of colonization and inferiority, thus contributing to a cycle of subjugation. As she forcefully articulates, “[i]ntercourse is a particular reality for women as an inferior class; and it has in it, as part of it, violation of boundaries, taking over, occupation, destruction of privacy” (156).

This viewpoint aligns with the analysis of Robert J.C. Young, who examines the complex interplay between sexuality and social inequality. In *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, Young argues that the cultural construction of race and sexuality has been instrumental in justifying and maintaining social disparities. Central to his argument is the view of colonialism as a “desiring machine,” highlighting a profound link between colonialism and sexuality. Young’s framework positions the colonizer as the male and the colonized as the female, metaphorically depicting colonization as a form of sexual imposition. According to Young,

Colonialism, in short, was not only a machine of war and administration, it was also a desiring machine. This desiring machine, with its unlimited appetite for territorial expansion, for ‘endless growth and self-reproduction’, for making connections and disjunctions, continuously forced disparate territories, histories and people to be thrust together like foreign bodies in the night. In that sense it was itself the instrument that produced its own darkest fantasy—the unlimited and ungovernable fertility of ‘unnatural’ unions. (93)

Asya’s sexual experiences clearly echo the arguments of Dworkin and Young, where she embodies the colonized subject while Saif and Gerald represent the colonizers. This colonial dynamic is particularly pronounced in Asya’s encounter with Saif. Notably, Saif’s actions bear a striking resemblance to an act of subjugation. This mirroring of power imbalances inherent in colonial relationships is supported by Asya’s own vivid portrayal of the encounter:

The head of his instrument was no sooner fixed in the opening, when by four or five sudden shoves he contrived to insert the head entirely. At this moment his penetration was not deep enough to cause me great pain, but he, well knowing what was coming, forcibly secured one of his arms around my body ... He began to improve his advantage by forcibly deepening his penetration ... The piercing shriek I gave proclaimed that I felt it up to the very quick; in short, his victory was complete. (Soueif 259)

Asya’s graphic account of the encounter, employing explicit language to highlight the forceful nature of the act and her subjugation to it, resonates powerfully with Dworkin’s theorization of sex as a microcosm of colonial subjugation. This resonance is further amplified by the emphasis placed upon Saif’s “victory” within the context of the encounter. This detail serves to illuminate the ultimate frustration of Asya’s pursuit of sexual autonomy within a system that prioritizes male dominance—a system perpetuated by both societal expectations and Saif’s own actions.

The colonial connotations become more pronounced with Gerald. Embodying the cultural imperialism of the West, Gerald objectifies Asya through his own lens of superiority and dominance. Asya’s identity is subordinated to his desires and perceptions, echoing the power imbalances characteristic of colonial relationships. Asya keenly observes his preference for mistresses from developing nations, highlighting a potential colonial mindset. When Gerald

refutes these claims, Asya asserts her viewpoint: “Yes, you do—and the reason you’ve gone for Trinidad—Vietnam—Egypt—is so you can feel superior. You can be the big white boss—you are a sexual imperialist” (Soueif 875). This awareness of Gerald’s perceived colonial mentality compels Asya to take on the role of an odalisque during one of their encounters:

Be like this for me, babe: naked and perfumed, your hair falling over your shoulders, wearing only your jewels—’

Her jewels that Saif had bought.

‘An odalisque you want?’ she smiles.

‘A what?’

‘A concubine. A female slave.’ (Soueif 667)

By consciously assuming the role of an odalisque in this sexual fantasy, Asya illuminates the objectification and subjugation inherent in Gerald’s desires. She turns the encounter into a performance, shedding light on the power dynamics inherent in colonial relationships. As Cariello observes,

Gerald embodies the white colonizer perfectly, particularly insofar as he exemplifies what Edward Said describes as the cultural imperialist or the ‘big white boss.’ Indeed, with Ahdaf Soueif, dialectical relations between cultures also become dialectical relations between sexed bodies. (319)

Having established the colonial undercurrents within Asya’s encounters with Saif and Gerald, a critical question regarding the nature of her agency emerges: Does her apparent defiance of conventional gender expectations truly represent an autonomous rebellion? A particularly insightful lens for examining this question is the complex interplay between love and sex within Asya’s narrative. This relationship becomes especially significant when analyzed through the prism of Egyptian societal norms governing female sexuality. Asya’s evolving perspective on the relationship between love and sex holds particular weight when juxtaposed against the influential ideas of Qasim Amin, a trailblazing Egyptian modernist thinker and advocate for women’s rights. Amin posits a distinct dichotomy in the experiences of sexuality between genders. According to Amin, men often perceive love as a conduit for physical pleasure, while women lean towards an emotional connection, seeking a spiritual and emotional union in intimacy: “A woman is less prone to carnal desires than a man is. Love for a man is a sensual inclination to the gratification of his physical pleasure. Love for a woman is an emotional affection that is directed at blending of two spirits” (136). This perspective underscores a prevailing societal expectation where women’s sexuality is frequently framed as inherently connected to emotional attachment.

Initially, Asya perceives love and desire as closely entwined, reflecting the sentiment that Amin posits among Egyptian women. However, her experiences with Saif challenge this perception as he refuses to consummate their love before marriage and fails to do so on their wedding night,

prompting her to question her own beliefs about love and emotional fulfilment. While Saif's refusal to consummate their love before marriage may indeed be influenced by societal expectations and values, Asya's response to this situation highlights her developing reconsideration of the traditional association of love and physical intimacy, underscoring the complexity of her journey toward sexual autonomy: "They tell you—all your life they tell you—that a woman's sexuality is responsive, a woman's sexuality is tied up with her emotions" (Soueif 465).

Ultimately, Asya abandons her belief in this connection, and her intimacy becomes less emotionally charged. This is initially evidenced by her reaction when Saif leaves her alone in Athens, where her newfound sense of freedom manifests in a desire for casual sexual encounters devoid of emotional attachment. She declares, "I'm free ... I can pick up a handsome man and spend the night with him and not even know his name or tell him mine" (Soueif 708). This growing separation between love and sex is further underscored by her willingness to experiment with the previously rejected plastic penis and, most importantly, her affair with Gerald. Despite a demonstrably absent emotional investment, Asya pursues a physical relationship with Gerald solely for the purpose of physical gratification: "I don't really care what becomes of G. I don't even like him much anymore ... I'm in this because I wanted him to stay one night. And because he made me feel physical again ... What I really want is to occasionally do it with him, then fall asleep and wake up to find he's not there" (Soueif 709–10). At the same time, while she reaffirms her love for Saif, she explicitly expresses her disinterest in a sexual relationship with him: "I love him and I'm just too connected to him ... But I don't want to sleep with him" (711).

Asya's evolving perspective on love and sex initially appears to disrupt traditional gender norms, as highlighted by Amin's views on female emotional connection. Her resistance to societal expectations of feminine passivity and her pursuit of sexual fulfilment outside of marriage challenge the notion of women's sexuality being solely tied to emotional attachment. However, a more nuanced analysis through the lens of Luce Irigaray reveals complexities within this apparent rebellion. Irigaray posits a compelling critique of the historical framing of women's sexuality within what she terms the "phallographic order" (68). She contends that Freud's conceptualization of women's sexuality, centred on "penis envy," is perpetually tethered to the masculine, asserting that it is "never defined with respect to any sex but the masculine" (69). A critical juncture in her argument is the focus within this order on penetration as the ultimate meaning of sexual intercourse. She views this emphasis as a patriarchal attempt to suppress women's inherent autoeroticism and tie their desire to men: "This autoeroticism is disrupted by a violent break-in: the brutal separation of the two lips by a violating penis, an intrusion that distracts and deflects the woman from this 'self-caressing' she needs if she is not to incur the disappearance of her own pleasure in sexual relations" (24).

Irigaray's framework necessitates a revaluation of Asya's seemingly autonomous pursuit of sexual gratification. While her actions challenge societal expectations, her embrace of sex devoid of emotional attachment through her extramarital loveless affair with Gerald and her experimentation with the plastic penis signifies a focus on the act of penetration that Irigaray

problematizes. This alignment compels us to question the extent to which Asya has truly re-defined her sexuality on her own terms, or whether she remains unconsciously influenced by patriarchal constructs.

This interpretation is further supported by Asya's insistence on penetration during her pre-marital encounter with Saif. While love is present, her focus on the physical act aligns with the very penetration-centered dynamic that Irigaray critiques:

'Please, Saif, I want you so.'

'I want you too, Princess, but—'

'No. Please. Please I want you inside me—'

'One day I'll come inside you—'

'No. Not one day, Saif. Now. Please. You want me. I know you do. And I want you so much. And it's right, I know it's right.' (Soueif 219–20)

Remarkably, when Saif finally achieves penetration, Asya's vivid description of the act, detailed earlier, emphasizes its painful and forceful nature—evidenced by the “piercing shriek” she emits. Through this portrayal, Irigaray's critique finds further resonance. According to Irigaray, the patriarchal framing of sexuality conditions women to accept the notion that “the body's pleasure always results from a forced entry—preferably bloody—into an enclosure” (201). Asya's own words: “I'm twenty-six and I've been waiting for nine years” (Soueif 741, emphasis in original), suggest an internalization of this patriarchal framing. Her subsequent pursuit of penetration through experimentation with the plastic penis reinforces this interpretation.

Irigaray goes on to firmly conclude that even the sexual pleasure a woman gets from sex within this framework is not real pleasure, but assimilation of the “techniques of pleasure” imposed by men for their own benefit. Irigaray vehemently proclaims:

Woman, in this sexual imaginary, is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies. That she may find pleasure there in that role, by proxy, is possible, even certain. But such pleasure is above all a masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own, and it leaves her in a familiar state of dependency upon man. Not knowing what she wants, ready for anything, even asking for more, so long as he will “take” her as his “object” when he seeks his own pleasure. (199)

Through the lens of Irigaray's critique, Asya's gratification within these encounters, if experienced at all, might then be interpreted as a product of fulfilling the patriarchal prescribed techniques rather than an exploration of her own desires. This interpretation aligns with Asya's potential unconscious adherence to the very structures she seeks to challenge. Joseph Massad further supports this notion, suggesting that “the journey of ... [Soueif's] characters is not one where liberation is the necessary telos, but rather the complex process through which

the unfolding of desire(s)—sexual, social, economic, and political—is shaped by the characters themselves and all that surrounds them” (Massad 75). Building upon Massad’s observation, this analysis delves deeper into the potential contradictions inherent in such journeys. Specifically, it suggests that Asya’s attempt to achieve sexual liberation, initially characterized by a defiance of societal expectations regarding female emotional involvement, ultimately aligns with a male-centric view of sexuality critiqued by Irigaray, which effectively relegates women’s desires and agency to a secondary status.

As Asya navigates various sexual encounters, her pursuit of sexual autonomy is clearly constrained by male dominance. A prime example is Saif, who exerts control over her desires by withholding consummation of their relationship. Saif’s control over her extends beyond sexuality, permeating Asya’s daily life as she resigns herself to the role of a wife within a patriarchal framework. As she states, “(H)e is the author and the director of our drama and I am just the cast. And I have decided to accept that because I care for him” (Soueif 711).

This dynamic, exemplified by the link between Asya’s limited sexual autonomy and her submission to Saif’s controlling behavior, aligns with Catherine MacKinnon’s theorization of gender and sexuality as inextricably linked within patriarchal systems. Echoing Dworkin, MacKinnon argues that sexuality, viewed holistically, is a construct engineered within a male-dominated hierarchical paradigm. Highlighting the interconnectedness of hierarchy in sexual and gender discrimination, she asserts: “Male dominance is sexual. Meaning: men in particular, if not exclusively, sexualize hierarchy; gender is one such instance” (127). This assertion underscores the fundamental link between male dominance and sexuality in MacKinnon’s argument. Following this logic, MacKinnon posits that sexual activity serves to reinforce existing gender inequalities. Societal expectations surrounding masculinity and femininity become intricately woven with prescribed sexual roles. The act of sex itself becomes a microcosm of broader power dynamics, mirroring male dominance through female submission. Within such a patriarchal framework, MacKinnon suggests, male-female identity can be primarily constructed through the male appropriation of the female body.

The scene depicting Tante Mohga’s illness offers a potential case study for this aspect. Asya’s father emphasizes the continued significance of physical touch, insisting they “keep touching her” (Soueif 517). When Asya contests his reasoning, he claims that “it was only through touch that we really knew things, that it was only by other people’s touching us that we knew we were here at all” (511). While this touch may not be inherently sexualized, its significance lies in the context of Tante Mohga’s situation. Her husband’s absence has arguably deprived her of a form of intimacy that previously contributed to her sense of self within the patriarchal framework MacKinnon critiques. This episode highlights the prevailing notion that male presence and touch serve as validating forces for female existence within the patriarchal framework.

Asya’s experiences provide additional compelling examples of this connection. Her bodily autonomy is undermined not only through sexual manipulation but also by direct physical control. Male figures dictate her reproductive choices, resulting in an unwanted pregnancy.

Furthermore, medical professionals perpetuate this power by infantilizing her, withholding access to contraception until after childbirth. The doctor's condescending reference to Asya as a "child" underscores the deeply entrenched power imbalances that significantly impede her pursuit of sexual and reproductive agency. Remarkably, even Asya's attempt to reclaim this agency through the prosthetic penis is subject to control by the doctor. Soueif's evocative description of this scene highlights the doctor's role in regulating Asya's bodily autonomy:

He had stood in his white coat beside a cabinet, and he was looking into a drawer that he had opened, and in the drawer was what looked like a big transparent xylophone: a row of plastic penises of different sizes. He had picked up the second smallest and looked at it, then put it back and picked the next size up. Then he had sat behind his desk and waved her to a chair. He'd held up the penis. 'I think you should begin with this. The nurse will give you some KY jelly. You lubricate and insert. Start with just a couple of minutes and then try to build it up. When you're comfortable with this for, say, twenty minutes, come back and we'll move on to the next size. (Soueif 599)

The doctor's authoritative demeanour is evident as he "waved her to a chair," followed by the selection of an appropriate size with a detached professionalism. His subsequent instructions, couched in the impersonal language of medical protocol: "lubricate and insert ... start with just a couple of minutes," further reduce her exploration to a sterile medical procedure. These systematic impositions on Asya's bodily autonomy constitute a significant obstacle in her pursuit of sexual agency, highlighting the pervasiveness of male dominance in regulating her sexuality, even within seemingly clinical contexts.

Ultimately, the narrative's culmination, with Asya's withdrawal from her sexual and romantic engagements to immerse herself in societal work back in Egypt, further suggest that her actions are not merely acts of defiance but also strategic adaptations to the gender expectations of her community. The nature of Asya's community work, involving initiatives that address local health and educational needs, underscores her effort to contribute positively within the bounds of accepted social norms. Asya's decision to prioritize societal work over personal desires can be interpreted as a conscious choice to conform to societal expectations of women prioritizing community and family. This strategic adaptation aims to gain acceptance and respect within her community, aligning with traditional gender roles despite her prior defiance of societal expectations regarding female sexuality. Al Saqqaf's analysis validates this interpretation as she interprets Asya's return as an embrace of "societal responsibility" where she "finds herself affective moral ideals and chooses to identify with her roots" (53).

3. Conclusion

This study delved into the complexities of Asya's entanglement within the patriarchal society portrayed in the novel. This society visibly objectifies the female form, shaping Asya's experiences

with a pervasive sense of subjugation. Initially, her defiance of societal norms concerning female sexuality presents as a bold act of liberation. Her extramarital affairs and exploration with a prosthetic penis signify a conscious rejection of traditional constraints. However, a deeper analysis unveils a more complex reality. Asya's seemingly autonomous choices become entangled with the very system she attempts to subvert. The unequal power dynamics within her relationships with Saif and Gerald expose the subtle mechanisms by which patriarchal systems exert control over women's bodies and desires. Moreover, Asya's actions, despite their rebellious intent, may subtly reinforce existing gender norms. This necessitates a critical re-evaluation of individual defiance as the sole strategy for dismantling established power structures.

Asya's narrative transcends the personal, serving as a microcosm of the broader struggles faced by women navigating a world dominated by patriarchal power structures. Her story lays bare the enduring sway of patriarchal ideologies and prompts a critical exploration of the complexities surrounding female autonomy within a deeply ingrained system. Her experiences compel a re-evaluation of conventional narratives surrounding female agency, urging a deeper understanding of the interplay between individual choice and societal constraint within the patriarchal framework.

The nature of Asya's journey, from initial rebellion to eventual accommodation, compels us to consider the psychological impact of navigating a patriarchal system. The narrative underscores the potential for such systems to erode a sense of agency and self-worth, even among those who actively resist. Asya's ultimate withdrawal from romantic and sexual pursuits may be interpreted as a form of self-preservation, a necessary retreat to protect her sense of self in the face of overwhelming societal pressures. This perspective highlights the psychological toll of defying patriarchal norms and the importance of acknowledging the emotional resilience required to sustain such resistance.

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