

# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

## Living in the Margins: The Hidden Dimension

**Veena Lekshmi U. R.**

Teacher Trainee, Mar Theophilus Training College, Thiruvananthapuram, India

### **Abstract:**

*Enclosures are usually described in concrete architectural terms. Deviating from the traditional notions of an enclosure, this paper looks at the manner in which the customs and traditions of a land can circumscribe its people, especially, its women folk.*

**Key words:** *Enclosure, customs, niqab, child marriage, honour*

### **1. Introduction**

I am Nujood, Age 10, and Divorced is a memoir written by Nujood, the youngest child bride in Yemen. The work was done in association with Delphine Minoui, a French reporter. The book first appeared in the French language. Linda Coverdale has done the English translation of the text. The memoir is a powerful record of the Yemanese tradition and the patriarchal system that encloses the women folk of Yemen. Each and every aspect of women life is strictly enclosed by the traditions and patriarchal system of Yemen. The women folk of Yemen are closed inside a system that marginalizes and oppresses them. Child marriage, an offspring of the customs and traditions of Yemen, is widely prevalent in the countryside of Yemen. Poverty often compels the fathers of Yemen to marry off their daughters at an early age. Nujood too was married off, at the age of nine. The memoir is a powerful reminder of the trials and tribulations that thousands of girls like Nujood encounter in their daily life when they ought to be playing with their friends.

### **2. Enclosed and Redeemed**

Yemen, 'Arabia Felix'- Happy Arabia, a land steeped in thousand years of history, where men never appear in public without curved daggers at their waists, while women hide their charms behind thick black veils" (7), imposes on its citizens, roles that they have to play in this land of mystery and magic. But these roles often tend to circumscribe the people of this small but beautiful country. Adrienne rich in her essay "Notes toward a Politics of Location" comments: " Whatever circumscribes or mutilates our feelings makes it more difficult to act" (36). Thus the burden of this enclosure is experienced more profoundly by the women folk of Yemen.

Patriarchy, tradition and poverty have enclosed them to the extent that their lives have predictable endings. Prisoners in their home and families, women suffer in silence. Without proper education and married off at an early age, most Yemanese women are mothers by the age of twenty. They are home makers who have to follow certain codes in the home and in the world. "Women are not taught how to make choices" (23). "Many other women narrators express this feeling of imprisonment. *In My Forbidden Face*, Latifa writes: "I can't think of anything to do. Sometimes I wander around my home like a convict taking a tour of her cell" (qtd. in Milani)

Each and every new generation inherits poverty from their predecessors. Girls like Nujood had to beg in the street to collect an amount adequate to cope up with educational and other demands.

Marriage for Nujood was "a big celebration most of all, with lots of presents, chocolate and jewellery" (50). Even though she was shocked when her father informed her that her turn had come, she thought of it as an escape hatch since " life at home had become impossible" (51). Poverty was at its peak then that her father thought marriage was the best way to protect her. The idea of protection that Nujood's father is preoccupied with often proves as a medium that robs his children, mainly his daughters of their freedom. Nujood's father says : " this marriage is the best way to protect her...this way she won't be raped by a stranger and become the prey to evil rumours" (54).

When Mona her elder sister comes to her defence telling her father that Nujood was too young to get married, he convinces her by saying that when Prophet Mohammed married Aisha she was only nine years old. Mona's attempts prove desperate since in Yemen " it's the men who give the orders and women who follow them"(55).

Honour is very important to the men of Yemen. Throughout the text we find the notion of honour spoken in volumes by men and women. Honour is the underlying force that gives impetus to the practice of wearing niqabs. The customs of Yemen are modeled as channels through which the dominant patriarchy can maintain the balance in society. On the morning after Nujood's marriage, Nujood's saw her mother reach into a bundle and pull out a black niqab, which she handed over to Nujood with the following words: " From this day on, you must cover yourself when going out into the street. You are now a married woman. Your face

must be seen by no one but your husband. Because it is his sharaf, his honour, that is at stake. And you must not disgrace it." Nujood continues : " never until that moment, had I been forced to veil myself completely" (63). Fatima Mernissi in "The Meaning of Spatial Boundaries", records: " The veil means that women is present in the men's world, but invisible, she has no right to be in the street... a woman has no right to use male spaces. If she enters them, she is upsetting the male's order and his peace of mind. She is actually committing an act of aggression against him, merely by being present where she should not be" (493-494).

Married off to a man three times her age, little Nujood finds it difficult to comprehend the meaning of marriage, the necessity to veil herself completely for the long ride away from her parents, for the new life beside a man who disgusted her. Marriage proves to be an instrument of legalized rape and Nujood, barely ten years old is sexually abused by her husband time and again. "Tortured by shame and pain, I suffered in silence..."(89).

Khardji, " the end of the earth", where Nujood was married off to, would have witnessed the end of Nujood as well. But displaying rare tenacity and courage, Nujood left Khadji, with a stoic decision that she will never again set foot there . Back in her home for a few days, Nujood informs her parents of the savagery, pain and distress that she had endured at Khadji. Honour which the men of Yemen covet as supreme impels Nujood's father to reject outright her decision to leave her husband. " It is out of the question for you to leave your husband" ( 95). We find the women of Yemen enclosed in the orders laid out by the patriarchal system, which holds honour and protecting women( by denying their rights) as matters of supreme importance. "It's a matter of sharaf, you hear me?" (96). Within the boundaries created for women with customs and sharaf as the binding force that concretises the boundary, women transgressing the boundary was a nightmare to the menfolk.

Her father's stand raises questions as to whose honour her father was defending when his own daughter's honour was at stake. Nujood realizes at once that she has to act quickly if she has to come out of the trap that her marriage had put in. For in Yemen "it's always the oldest , and the men, who have the last word" (97). It was Dowla, her father's second wife who suggested that approaching the courthouse would be the remedial step to seek the divorce. Nujood sneaked away from her home to the courthouse and was lend a helping hand by Shada, one of the best lady lawyers in Yemen. The media campaigns of Shada pays off and several organizations come to the forefront and join the cause for Nujood's freedom that the courthouse was full to bursting on the day of the verdict. After a long and tedious session, the court grants Nujood, her much awaited divorce.

Freeing herself from the fetters that hitherto chained her, Nujood felt "my eyes are shining, as if they were discovering for the first time the slightest bits of beauty in being alive" (121).

Nujood's divorce was a sensational event in the history of Yemen. It reversed the conventions prevalent in society regarding divorce. Traditionally men are entitled to divorce any time by merely declaring verbally their intention. But displaying rare diligence and fortitude Nujood transcended the barriers that confined her. The spark was thus ignited by Dowla, which later grew into a bright flame and still continues to ignite the lives of thousands of girls like Nujood.

### 3. Conclusion

When we talk of enclosed spaces, it is normally perceived as confinement within four walls. These walls need not be always visible and tangible. The customs and traditions of Yemen deeprooted in the psyche of its people, especially its menfolk, concretise and close the world of women. These invisible walls knock down the women. Only when one gets knocked down by these intangible enclosures that one realizes the labyrinthine nature of these confinements. Women fall into domestic spheres and crippled in their minds, they fail to enter the public sphere. The domestic sphere, the realm of spirituality asks them to follow certain norms that circumscribe them. Thus these spaces become intellectual enclosures where women cannot assert their rationality. Yemen becomes a "thinly disguised prison"( Kelleghan 356) which Nujood fathoms through her experience.

The enclosed individual interacts with the space he hopes to possess. Nujood successfully transcends the barriers that confined her due to her longing for this space. She never allowed the enclosure to chain her mind. With her faith and immense hope, Nujood becomes a universal figure who prompts the readers to stand up and rise to the occasion even in the face of the gravest adversity. Nujood's struggles "are symptomatic of the difficulties which every women in a patriarchal society must meet and overcome" (qtd. in Plasa 61). Education is the golden key to open the closed doors of Yemanese society; the key that will open a new world where women can assert their moral and intellectual freedom.

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