

Balcony of Disgrace: A Trial against Honour Crimes

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Abstract

The novelist, Ibrahim Nasrallah, draws a marvelous artistic portrait that reflects the cruelty of honour crimes. The novelist explores the reality of the Arabic woman's life especially in the poor and middle classes by using all his experiences and knowledge in an aesthetical way. To emphasize, the writer sheds light on the disgrace phenomenon which is based on the idea of purifying the reputation of the family by killing the victim. This phenomenon rises in the societies that are controlled by the mentalities which stick to the primitive traditions and norms. These societies are coined by the ignorant, weak and reactionary mentalities. In spite of the universal efforts to eradicate ferocity against women, some Arab women continue to tolerate the maximum form of humiliation that is exemplified by honour crimes. This paper investigates how the institutional ignoring of honor crimes are rooted in traditional values that are justified by social norms and existing penal codes. Last, the paper will provide arenas of further critical thinking which could help to grasp this phenomenon in regard to gender threat and oppression of women.

Keywords: Ibrahim Nasrallah, *Balcony of Disgrace*, Honour crimes, Penal codes, Masculinity, A charge

Introduction

Honour is framed through the binary opposition of male 'honour' and female 'disgrace', whereby manhood is largely framed in terms of female virginity. The concept of 'honour' is tightly attached to male's social worth, but most closely in regard to the reputation and social behavior of female family members (Spierenburg, 1998, p. 2; Araji, 2000, p. 2). Disgrace is cleaned through the punishment of the anomalous female (Araji, 2000, p. 4), and the acclaimed disgrace caused by such actions can be cleaned through the elimination of the source of such 'disgrace'—the woman. Women are certainly the main victims of honour crimes at the hands of largely male criminals (Sen 2005, p. 48; Welchman & Hossain, 2005, p. 6). In fact, if men do not try to fix or renew the male family 'honour' in this way, they are seen as manless (Gilmore, 1987, p. 10; Abu-Odeh, 1996, p. 152). Women are in charge of protecting their own honour, and women who violate honour codes are treated more severely than their male peers (Baker, Gregware & Cassidy, 1999, p. 168). Purna Sen (2005, p. 48) argues that "codes of honour serve to construct not only what it means to be a woman but also what it means to be a man, and hence are central to social meanings of gender". On the same wavelength, other writers note that the maintaining of honour is inescapably lined up with the concepts of masculinity.

Honour is a word that has many meanings; it cannot be confined in only one fixed identification. In other words, the concept of honour differs from one person to another and from one place to another; it is the result of customs and norms that differ according to the communities. This concept might be connected with the concepts of morals, credibility, sacrifice, and other virtues. It also might be connected with the social and sexual relations in the eastern societies. In Islamic societies, family honour is inextricably connected to the virginity of the females within the family. Ayaan Ali (2007, p.72) refers to this as:

In our household, the whole subject of what was between your legs was taboo. I knew what I needed to know about sex, and my mother knew that I knew it... my sexuality belonged to the owner of my family: my father and uncles. It was obvious that I absolutely had to be a virgin at marriage, because to do otherwise would damage the honor of my father and his whole clan-uncles, brothers, male cousins- forever and irretrievably. The place between my legs was sewn up to prevent it. It would be broken only by my husband. I don't remember my mother ever telling me these things, but I knew them.

Unlike Western communities where nobody is allowed to interfere in the woman's personal life, everyone can interfere in the Arab woman's life. The woman in most of the Arabic communities is restricted by the traditions and norms which are not to be violated by her; otherwise, she will be exposed to killing, defamation or beating.

Main Text:

Honour crimes are committed to prevent disgrace. They are committed by a person who sees his wife, one of his genetic relatives, or his sister in the case of adultery, illegal intercourse, or in a doubtful case with another person. Sexual imprudence can range from engaging in adultery to being the victim of rape (Warrick, 2005, p. 322). Honor crimes are nothing recent, and neither is the use of religion to validate these crimes. An honour crime is a homicidal crime executed against a woman who is believed to have done some sexual imprudence resulting in the loss of her family's honour.

Nasrallah's *Balcony of Disgrace* demonstrates the cruelty and injustice of honour crimes. Firstly, and before anything, let us put some flowers on the graves of Manar, Tagrid, Lubna, Widad, Etab, and Shamah. In Nasrallah's novel, these young girls prepare their souls and bodies to be the springs of love, beauty, fertility and giving. However, their blossoming is massacred by the so-called honour keepers. Let us celebrate Manar, who is the martyr and the witness on the cruelty of those who appoint themselves as judges on people's behaviours. Let us investigate the cruelty of those who make themselves guardians on the innocent young girls and grant themselves the right to rob their life.

What kind of shame and disgrace is demonstrated in *Balcony of Disgrace*? Is it the shame of the victim or that of the treacherous murderer? Or is it the shame of the society that still grants the scarf of championship and the medals of courage and indignity to the coward criminal who sheds the blood of innocent young girls alongside the road? With a lot of pain and agony, many thanks to Nasrallah who portrays this acclaimed shameful shame!

Novels are more public and influential than the legal wrangling, political dialogues, and social studies. Therefore, if they are involved in the dramatic and cinematographic treatments, their value is maximized. Accordingly, *Balcony of Disgrace* has a multidimensional value. Nasrallah, whose works are courageous and creative, handles this thorny subject and throws the shame at the forces of retardation and darkness. He reveals the relativity of the dominating concepts like honour, virtue, purity, and manhood. In this way, he pushes the Arabic novel to go forward in the way of challenge and to be involved in the "taboo" issues which many writers hesitate to be involved with.

Balcony of Disgrace is realistic with no exaggeration. The novel introduces the woman as a human in the first and last place. She is worthy of living and being loved and respected, which is the opposite of the retardation forces which see the woman as just a body. These forces never look at the woman outside being the symbol of sin, seduction, and impurity.

The writer chooses the title of his novel intentionally. The balcony is an overlooking site from which all the vices and follies of society can be captured such as the practice of honour crimes. Nasrallah, inspects the practice of honour crimes from a high place; therefore, he sees it fully. Nasrallah defends the woman in *Balcony of Disgrace* by showing how she is oppressed by her family, relatives, and neighbours. The novel reflects a tragic reality that upgrades the criminal and degrades the victim. From the balcony, Nassrallah looks at one type of the crimes committed against women to defend the honour of the family. He presents a realistic thorny social issue that no modern writer has the courage to present.

The novel is written in a precise human vision and an artistic structure which goes along with the vision. *Balcony of Disgrace* is a simple novel, but it is only apparently simple. It includes psychological techniques that participate in developing the excitement element in the novel. This novel unfolds the curtains of the criminal world and its ways of deception, lying, and collusion. Moreover, the novel in its building, language and technique is simple, and that makes it read by many people in the Arab world and abroad. The artistic building of the novel looks simple and attractive. It consists of four chapters, including a series of about fifty five short episodes. It goes smoothly with gradual excitement until reaching the scene of massacre. Finally, the novel is concluded with a letter from the victim that leaves in the individual an unforgettable influence. The novel includes advancement and delaying, anticipation and retrieving; however, excitement never stops.

In *Balcony of Disgrace*, the events revolve around a modest family that we have seen many families alike in the Egyptian films and series except with a narrative ability of a higher level mixed with a clever cinematic play. This novel is also characterized by an artistic progression and regression and with a high level of police excitation techniques. In this way, the writer attracts the reader through the 236 pages of his novel until the reader arrives to the catastrophic letter of Manar at the end of the novel.

Nasrallah resorts to nature to delve deeply into the issue of honour crimes. Nature never puts him down when he inspires from it his images and language. One chapter begins with the following statement in alignment with the state of worry and fear: "The sky was full with clouds, suddenly, the rain fell heavily, it changed the streets into rivers and every empty space of the ground into a lake" (Nasrallah, 2010, p.139). In another place, Nasrallah (2010, p.200) says: "The clouds were gathered warning in a storm that will continue for days". Clearly, Nasrallah uses images derived from cloudy nature as a foreshadowing for the horror and danger of honour crimes that will appear over the subsequent pages.

The other tool that the writer employs skillfully in the novel is the manipulation of colours. Although the black color dominates the novel, the white and red do not change the view, but they deepen the darkness. The darkness and the very deep black nights have been shown tens of times in the novel in order to portray its dark atmosphere destroying the joy that appear in the first parts. The importance of colours is demonstrated through the black flag and the white one which Salem puts on his brother's house. The black flag is a symbol of the impure honour, which should be washed in order to be replaced by the white flag as a symbol of the retrieved honour (Nasrallah, 2010, p. 109). This indicates the compound horrible sadism and masochism that are involved in the flags' logic! The three colours are mixed together in the rape scene. They are merged in one colour, the black: "He ordered her to move, when she moved, she saw over the white bed cover a blood spot, it was more black than any blood she had ever seen" (Nasrallah, 2010, p.114).

Nasrallah is a distinguished novelist. He relies in his novel on the novelistic narration. He leaves his characters talking about themselves, and he does not interfere or introduce his opinion about what happens. He uncovers the moral duplicity of society. He calls for change through literature, embodying the role of the writer in society. The approach of the novel is clear with a standard Arabic language. He uses songs and public proverbs with a sensitive rhythm as a musical background of the events.

There is an annual massacre that happens repeatedly in this world. It is committed silently with five thousand victims of women annually. There are five thousand stories moving in the air. Five thousand souls wish to escape. Five thousand stories not being read by anybody. But unfortunately there are no sufficient throats to release the precious high shout that is being silenced every day. It is a world where people swallow their throats as they swallow the trespasses on their humanity. In this narrow world, there is a woman being killed each half an hour either because she loves or because her killers believe in this. What's more, she could be killed or subject her reputation to a scandal to gain her share of air and soil.

On the literary level, silence in the face of honour crimes is a crime itself. The silence towards such an issue means accepting it. Nasrallah shocks us by our social reality and our blind culture represented by killing women under a disgusting slogan called "killing motivated by honour". It seems as if the honour of the Arabic individual is pivoted in some centimeters between the thighs of the woman forgetting betrayal, stealing, lying, corruption, robbery and Fraud.

Nasrallah begins his novel with a report of the UN in 2009 which indicates that the number of honour crimes committed annually is 5000 all over the world (Nasrallah, 2010, p.5). In Jordan, 20 to 30 honour crimes are committed per year (Warrick, 2005:325). In Lebanon, twenty-five reported honor crimes were committed during 1980-2003 (Hoyek, Sidawi, &Mrad, 2005, p.129).

Although Islam has come to overcome the oppressive and bad habits, killing women to keep the honour of the family still exists in the heads of the Arabs. Nasrallah draws an artistic portrait of the reality of our Arabic society with all of its fear, masculinity and dominance. The masculine characters in the novel play dominating roles, and they practice oppression against women as shown by Salem, Ameen, and Younis. The father of Manar has a different character as he supports her; however, he has a weak voice after becoming sick. The character of the second brother, Fuad, plays the role of the educated person, but he is not able to raise his voice. This character represents the minority that cannot deviate from the norm.

Balcony of Disgrace challenges honour crimes which are a reflection of the retardation and degradation of society. In these crimes, the victims are innocent women deprived from their rights. Nasrallah presents in his novel many cases of honour crimes. The first case is exemplified by the novel's heroine, Manar. Manar is raped cruelly by a taxi driver. Her elder brother, Ameen, borrows money from the driver, Younis, who sleeps with prostitutes although he is married. When Ameen does not repay Younis his money, Younis rapes his sister, Manar, to take revenge. Manar is graduated from the College of Science, and she works as a social researcher in public high school. Manar becomes pregnant as a result of the rape. Her brother knows about this through his second wife, Tamam, whom he used to sleep with before getting married to. Manar's mother defends her together with Nabeelah, the first wife of Ameen, and she is also defended by her little brother, Anwar. The doctor prohibits her abortion because the family refuses to pay him the amount of money being asked for. Although Manar sells her gold to pay the money, the doctor also refuses to make the abortion except in a hospital, and that leads Manar to enter the jail where she is exposed to a lesbian rape by Widad. Manar gives birth to her baby in jail, and then she is sent to Dubai to live with her brother, Abdul Raof. Unfortunately, Manar is shot dead by Ameen, leaving a letter in which she expresses her love to her parents, brothers, and family: "I always feel that I don't exist in not being close to you. How much I love you. How much I feel lonely and lost without you being close to me" (Nasrallah, 2010, p. 236).

Taghrid is the second case of honour crimes demonstrated in the novel. Taghrid is pregnant by incest from her brother, who ironically tries to kill her as a defense of the family's honour, but she escapes by a miracle, and that makes the secret uncovered. In the investigation, he immediately confesses that he commits the incest and the killing (Nasrallah, 2010, pp. 98-99). The incest actions are widely hidden. In many cases, honour crimes are used to hide incest. To put in other terms, some women who are killed in honour crimes are raped by male family members. Incest is a crime that must be discussed in public. It is one of the most serious crimes that affects the life of the human heavily, and it should be subjected to heavy punishment.

Other victims of honour crimes are Lubna and Shama. Lubna, Manar's partner in prison, is pregnant from her colleague who used to promise her that he will marry her but in vain. When her family knows about this, her brother shoots her, but she does not die, and she remains in prison all of her life (Nasrallah, 2010, pp.202-203). Shama, the strong farmer girl, becomes pregnant out of wedlock, but she kills her baby. Accordingly, she is imprisoned for seven years (Nasrallah, 2010, pp.200-201). However, if one of her brother kills her, he will not stay in prison more than six months.

I'm wondering whether the novel represents reality or is it a figment of imagination? In more than one interview, the writer says that he has read many real stories about what is so called honour crimes that are committed in Arabic societies. Therefore, *Balcony of Disgrace* portrays reality to a far extent, but it does not present it as social document or journalistic news. It is originally an imaginary work. Its reality does not reduce its level of creativity. At the same time, its imaginative shape does not take it away from reality. The most imaginative parts in the novel which are related to the artistic building are represented in two places. One of these imaginative parts is the story of the school girl, Taghrid whose brother does not hesitate to rape. Then, he does not hesitate to kill her for fear that his secret might be uncovered. This imaginative part moves the reader to the story of Manar, the social supervisor in Taghrid's school. The second imaginative episode is demonstrated when Manar's brother pushes her to jail by a clever trick. Through this episode, the writer enters himself to the jail world in order to make us- as readers- meet other victims, such as Widad, Lubna, Etab, Shamah and others. By this, Nasrallah implies that Manar is not a unique victim in our society.

The novel in general is a charge against all. Everyone participates in the crime; everyone is charged; everybody bears a part of the responsibility. Undoubtedly, the novel is a charge against the society which tolerates the male who commits a sin porously, but it rebels against the girl even if she is a prey. This hypocrite society insists to kill her regardless whether the victim was compelled to commit the unforgivable sin or not. Accordingly, it is a blind society that cannot differentiate between the victim and the victimizer. Honour crimes are committed by a crenel society stuck with its blind traditions and stereotyped culture. These fragile traditions aim to make the girls as movable dummies swinging between the family and the husband with no independence. This society constrains itself with various chains: social and ancestral. It surrounds its individuals with many taboos.

The existentialists distinguish between the original existence in which the individual has his own choices according to his own vision and philosophy and the non- original existence in which the individual is subjected to external influences. Unfortunately, we belong to the second type, which means that we lack freedom and autonomy.

The novel is a charge against the father and Manar altogether. The novel is a charge against the victim, Manar. She should have doubted Younis. She should have been more alert; she should not have been deceived. Manar is blind from seeing the reality of her society; therefore, she remains naïve and simple. The father is charged because he does not solve her problem, and he leaves her in the hands of others who do not have mercy upon her, such as the doctor, the sister-in-law, and the brother. Her father does not interfere even with one word in her favour. Before she is raped, her father supports her. He stands in the face of her uncle and her brother. After she is raped; however, he does not defend her (Nasrallah, 2010, pp. 171-174).

The novel is a charge against the corrupted brother who steals, commits adultery, drinks alcohol, and goes to nightclubs, but he accuses his sister with a crime she never committed." Ameen and Younis went together to nightclubs and pubs. They also shared a prostitute together on the rear chair of the car" (Nasrallah, 2010, p. 86). His problem with Younis leads Younis to take revenge on him by raping his sister. Younis pretends to be an angel, but he rapes Manar to take revenge against her brother. Younis says:" I will not beg for my money. I will not ask for it again. Be sure that when you forget that you had taken my money completely, I will make you remember that by doing something you will never forget" (Nasrallah, 2010, p. 89).

It is a charge against uncle Salem, who plans to clean the disgrace and to kill Manar in a response to the fragile societal values. The uncle is underdeveloped; he resists development or renewal. He plans to kill Manar to get the house of his brother. He deceives everybody, such as the police, the guarantor, Abdul-Raouf, and Manar. He also forces the mother to attract Manar for death (Nasrallah, 2010, p. 221).

It is a charge against Issam, who easily allows Manar to ride the Taxi with Younis. Issam never asks for Manar's hand because he is afraid of being rejected (Nasrallah, 2010, p.80). He expects that because he is unemployed, Manar's family would not accept him to marry her.

It is a charge against Tamam, the second wife of Ameen. Tamam falls in sin with Ameen before marriage. She marries Ameen on the same day of their adultery. This implies that women who commit adultery with their approval would not be punished while those who are raped are punished.

It is a charge against Ameen's mother who submits to the killers by attracting her daughter to death. Furthermore, it is a charge against the neighbour who broadcasts the news very fast. If she has an idea about the neighbors' rights not to distort their reputation, she would not disclose their secret. It is a charge against the population of the area where Manar lives in. These people talk about the other as if they are too far from such events; they are not wise because every one might face similar problems (Nasrallah, 2010, pp.160-163).

Moreover, it is a charge against the miser brother, Abdul-Raouf, who leaves his family and his weak father for poverty and loss (Nasrallah, 2010, p.218). More and above, it is a charge against the physician who demands a large amount of money from Manar to abort her. Even when she brings the money, he refrains due to his fear of some witnesses and not because of ethics (Nasrallah, 2010, pp.160-161).

Specifically, it is a charge against the brother who violates his sister's virginity, Taghreed. After the death of his father, the killer rapes her many times. He kills her because of her courage to tell her mother about her brother's crime (Nasrallah, 2010, pp.98-99).

Equally important, it is a charge against the female jailers who deal badly with the female prisoners. The female jailors leave the forest law domains in jail although the victims are found in a reformation center where they are supposed to get the best reformation and guiding means (Nasrallah, 2010, pp.189-190).

It is a charge against the oppressive law which equalizes between the victim and the offender. This oppressive law favors the offender and dilates the crime with unacceptable justifications. It is a charge against the law which puts the victim in prison to protect her (Nasrallah, 2010, p. 181), but she finds herself facing a new stronger oppression and bad treatment. It is a charge against the law which leaves the offender free because he is claimed to be escaping from justice. However, if he commits another kind of crime, he will be chased by hundreds of policemen.

Most of the Arabic laws have special provision for honour crimes; some of them exempt the actor from punishment, and some of them give him a diluted excuse. With a population prevailed by Sunni Muslims, Jordan has undergone a battle against honor crimes. The Hashemite monarchy and other institutions strive to obsolete Article 340 from the Jordanian Penal Code, which provides excused or reduced punishment to male doers of honour crimes.

Given the customary understanding that a woman carries the honour of her family, Article 340 has been considered as an official approval of honour crimes. Article 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code is an official facilitator of the crime. Hostility to this article is based on the injustice that gives an excused or reduced punishment for a male who injures or kills a wife or a female relative and her male companion upon finding them engaged in adultery. The term *honour* is never clearly referred to in the article. The article states:

1. He benefits from an exculpatory excuse who surprises his wife or one of his female unawfuls [*muharim*, a woman related to him by a close enough degree to preclude marriage between them] in the act of adultery with another man and kills, wounds, or injures one or both of them.
2. The perpetrator of a killing, wounding, or injury benefits from a mitigating excuse if he surprises his wife or one of his female ascendants or siblings with another in an unlawful bed. (Warrick ,2005, p. 326)

The Qur'an demands four witnesses to adultery to execute the penalty of 100 lashes, and it even requires that one who does not have four witnesses should receive 80 lashes for defamation (Qur'an, 24:4). If a man ambushes his wife or a female relative in the act of adultery, it is not logical that he will do so with the fellowship of three others. So, according to the Qur'an, a man who murders a woman in this scenario and does not provide four witnesses is himself culpable and he should be punished. However, Article 340 prioritizes the woman's adultery, and instead focuses on lessening the man's punishment

According to experts of criminal law, Middle Eastern law provides leniency to men who kill under the cover of honour (Arnold, 2001; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2005; Warrick, 2005). To sum up, Middle Eastern penal codes are discriminatory against women as they provide the perpetrators of honour crimes a reduced punishment if there is a clue of provocation (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2002, p. 587). In addition, these articles do not place a great responsibility over men leaving women with no shelter. Accordingly, honor crimes are a major horror for women in the Middle East (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2005, p.168).

Conclusion

According to Ernest Fischer, "Art must show the world as changeable. And help to change it...It is also necessary because of the magic that lies in it" (qtd in Szanto, 1978, pp. 176-177). As specified by Fisher, this novel goes directly towards the function of art and its necessity by implying that the individual should understand the world and change it. Art is able to do that not by a direct political speech but by the creative magic that lies in it. This magic is similar to an internal seduction that makes us attracted to it without discovering its secret. This novel will be added to the great creations which made a practical and direct change in many of the indisputable and dominating laws. The novel raises many discussions because it tackles honour crimes from all sides. This reminds us with what Fyodor *Dostoevsky's* autobiography has done in the world inside the Siberian exile. After the Russian Tsar read *Dostoevsky's* autobiography, he cried and cancelled the torture system. Similarly, the novel of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe in America did the same during the slavery era. Likewise, I believe that *Balcony of Disgrace* by Nasrallah will participate in eliminating or changing the indulgent criminal laws of what is called honour crimes. Therefore, it was not a coincidence that Nasrallah was keen to sign the novel in Amman on the eighth of March, which is the Woman's World Day. It is hoped that this novel will open a horizon to change some of the wrong behaviours that are refused by all the religions.

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