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Resistance/Complicity in Women's Subordination to Patriarchal Powers in The Sand Fish

A B S T R A C T

One of the objectives of feminism in the academia is to expose, in creative and critical resistance literature, various facets of men's justification for the subordination of women. Resistance literature is growing as a massive body of work in the Arab region too, especially the creative and critical works by Arab women writers, and Maha Gargash's contribution to it is commendable. The present paper examines the nature of struggle the protagonist, Noora, in Gargash's novel *The Sand Fish* launches against patriarchal forces to combat her oppression. An analysis of the fictional character Noora reveals a clear-cut demarcation in the development of her philosophy of life before and after her marriage. She strongly resists patriarchal domination before her marriage, but becomes complicit in her subjugation after marriage. The issue of her complicity has been investigated with insights from Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of the subject in *The Second Sex* (1949). Noora's complicity primarily owes to her material and social situation, but existential angst is also found to be at play influencing her decisions.

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المقاومة / التواطؤ في تبعية النساء للسلطة الأبوية في سمكة الرمل

م. د. إيمان ماهر جليل / جامعة تكريت ، كلية الآداب ، قسم الترجمة

الخلاصة:

أحد أهداف الحركة النسوية في الأوساط الأكاديمية هو الكشف ، في أدبيات المقاومة الإبداعية والنقدية ، عن مختلف جوانب تبرير الرجال لتبعية النساء. يتنامى أدب المقاومة كمجموعة ضخمة من الأعمال في المنطقة العربية أيضاً ، وخاصة الأعمال الإبداعية والنقدية للكاتبات العربيات ، ومساهمة مها

قرقاش فيه جديرة بالثناء. يتناول هذا البحث طبيعة نضال البطلة نورا في رواية قرقاش "سمكة الرمل" الذي انتهجته ضد القوى الأبوية لمحاربة اضطهادها. يكشف تحليل شخصية نورا عن تطور واضح في فلسفتها في الحياة قبل زواجها وبعده. تقاوم نورا بشدة الهيمنة الأبوية قبل زواجها ، لكنها تتواطأ في إخضاعها بعد الزواج. تم التحقيق في قضية توأطؤها مع رؤى من تحليل سيمون دي بوفوار للموضوع في الجنس الثاني (١٩٤٩). يرجع توأطؤ نورا في المقام الأول إلى وضعها المادي والاجتماعي ، لكن القلق الوجودي يقوم أيضاً بدور في التأثير على قراراتها.

1.0 Introduction

The Sand Fish, a fictional narrative by Dubai-based writer, Maha Gargash (2009), relates the story of a young girl, Noora, who faces insurmountable problems in life the source of which could be traced to the patriarchal domination of women in her community. Although, historically the story is set in the mid-period of the twentieth century, much before petrol altered life in the Gulf region drastically, yet it is also relatable to the lives of postmodern Arab women since the issues faced by Arab women almost a century ago aren't settled yet (Walonen 2016). Noora, as a young girl, roamed freely in the hills and vales surrounding her mountainside village, doing household chores, like collecting firewood and drawing water from the well, playing alongside her younger brother, and competing with him for everything. Her father was liberal with her and never objected to her assertion of equality with her brother, and he "mixed up the male-female roles so that they were interchangeable. And that was how he had brought them up" (24). But, owing to a tragedy in his tribe, he goes insane, and one day disappeared in the mountains, never to return. The family responsibility fell on the shoulders of Noora's younger brother, Sager, who behaved like a patriarch. The family was poor, just managing a bare, hand-to-mouth existence. Sager wished for a good life for Noora, free from poverty. Fortunately (or unfortunately), he got such a chance as one issueless rich pearl merchant was seeking a wife. Sager settled Noora's marriage to this mature man who already had two wives but was looking for a young wife to bear his child. Noora was extremely unhappy and resisted her marriage to an old man. She hated both her brother and her husband since they were responsible for her life going topsy-turvy, crashing all her dreams. Her dislike of her husband, particularly her frustration at a life of subjugation, makes life unbearable for her, but ultimately she learns to make compromises to live peacefully.

The basic issues affecting the lives of Arab women negatively in the 1950s, as depicted in *The Sand Fish*, are more or less unchanged/unchallenged in the modern societies in the Arab world, such as no restrictions on wealthy old men marrying young girls since the mainstream ideology, backed by religious establishment in allowing polygamy, favours men and sidelines the happiness of women, financial/physical dependence of women on men, social insecurity and domestic confinement for women, and strict social restrictions on women's freedom in every aspect and sphere of life (see, for example, Al-Refi'i 2021; Al-Sudeary 2012; Bruneau 2018; Holt & Jawad 2013; Lerner 1986; Mahmood 2005; Poya 1999; Sholkamy 2010). Men take over women's lives so completely that there remains no scope for women's self-expression. In an interesting study of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, Mahmood (2020) observes that female characters in the play speak "the mind of their male counterparts" (p. 57). Although, as the author says, "Shakespeare is treated as a proto-feminist author in his way of constructing the female characters" (p. 59). Salem and Al-Doury (2021) also note that even in France, "women were rarely presented as independent beings in the patriarchal society" (p. 335). In the present study, the two men in *The Sand Fish*, one a father (Shamsa's father Juma) and the other a husband (Shamsa's husband Jassem), talk about Shamsa, the woman in question, as an object, as their property, who they own at a particular time and occasion:

"And what did you tell her when she came home to you?" Jassem had lowered his voice, but the rumble in it remained.

"What can I tell her?" said Juma. "I told her she could stay till you came back, but then, she must go to Wadeema. After all, *she doesn't belong to me anymore. She's yours.*"

Jassem grunted. "You are a good friend and a good father," he said. "But now I have got to sort this mess out. Let's go and fetch her." (106) (italics added)

Women are there not to play any important role in the society since they are not at all considered mentally and physically fit to play any other role than cook, sew and make babies. Yaqoota, the slave girl, reminds Noora the same when she asked about her duties in the Jassem household:

"So we drink the water from the village well."

"Should I bring that?"

"No." A squiggle of puzzlement broke the taut skin on Yaqoota's forehead.

"Yusef the water seller takes care of that."

"Well, what are my duties?"

This time Yaqoota did not laugh. Instead, she looked deep into Noora’s eyes. “Don’t you know? *Your duty is to make a baby.*” (116) (Italics added)

Women are not supposed to enjoy even the marital relationship, but take the act aimed at making a baby. When a frightened Noora seeks advice, “What should I do?” from Lateefa, Jassem’s first wife, for her fist night with Jassem, she responds: “Ah, that’s easy,” said Lateefa. “Just lie back and do nothing” (118). But, though *The Sand Fish* represents the struggles of an Arab woman fighting against oppression and yearning for some freedom, the narrative does not present freedom from the oppressive environment as the straightforward goal of the protagonist, rather, at times Noora embraces her captivity willingly, especially after her marriage. The issue acquires complexity since Noora displays a rebel’s attitude before her marriage but turns tame once she gets pregnant and becomes the most favourite among the three wives of her husband. For instance, she rejects the offer of freedom from the sophisticated slavery of the household in favour of a settled, financially safe life for herself and her child. In a sense, Noora is willingly complicit in her slavery and unfreedom as well as in the perpetuation of patriarchal dominance in the house. Simone De Beauvoir (1949/2011), in *The Second Sex*, has analysed this peculiar tendency among women, i.e. their complicity in their unfreedom and their willingness to embrace a life of subjugation under men. The issue has been explored in detail by feminist scholars (e.g., Knowles 2019; Bauer 2006; James 2003; Kruks 1987), but only from a theoretical perspective. It’s applied side needs further investigation, for example, to see how creative writers have employed women’s [inherent] compliance in their subordination in their stories—to justify the action or to denounce the women protagonists in their works. The present paper is an attempt in this direction. I have investigated the character of Noora, the protagonist in *The Sand Fish*, with a view to see how far her portrait represents the struggle of an Arab woman for her freedom from a life of subordination to men, and to what extent she display complicity in her unfreedom and makes choices to remain subordinate to men affecting her life. In the process, I hope to explore the factors affecting the psychological make-up of the protagonist that prompt her to make, rather contradictory, the choices she makes at different time intervals in her life.

Women become complicit in their subordination, unfreedom, even oppression under patriarchal dominance, for several factors, but the two most significant factors that are discussed by Beauvoir in her book (1949) are economic dependence and social insecurity. In the present paper, I shall dwell on how Gargash has exploited these two factors in her fictional work to comment on Arab women’s lives that, although freedom from patriarchal oppression may be their

ultimate goal, yet a large number of Arab women are not in a position to embrace freedom for the factors mentioned above. Like Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* “interlaces material, existential, and phenomenological analyses to create a rich picture of unfree situation of women in society, but why women become complicit in their own unfreedom remains an open question” (Knowles 242), equally compelling is the analysis, albeit fictional, of the unfreedom of Arab women in Gargash’s *The Sand Fish* involving the analysis of their material and existential situation, and yet the same question remains open to their complicity too. The third important factor in women’s complicity that Beauvoir discusses, and I will also take into account while analyzing Noora’s character, is women’s existential dread towards freedom. To Beauvoir, existential dreads is a universal factor contributing to women’s complicity in their slavery.

1.1 The Profile of Novelist:

Maha Gargash is an Emirati novelist, who was born in a well-known business family in Dubai. Gargash obtained a Bachelor of Radio/TV from the University of George Washington in Washington D.C., as well as the College of Goldsmiths in London awarded her a Masters (HarperCollins Publishers, n.d.). She has worked at Dubai Television as a documentary maker where she has mostly addressed in her programs the traditional Arabian societies, and has established her private television company. Despite working for 20 years in television documentaries, Gargash decides to be exclusively a writer since writing and reading books are her main interests since childhood (McCafferty, 2012).

1.2 The Sand Fish:

The Sand Fish: A Novel from Dubai was published in 2009 by a well-known American publisher HarperCollins and has received excellent reviews (Dubai Media Inc., 2015). The novel achieved the status of the best-selling novel in the Middle East as the publisher sold 25,000 copies, and it catapulted Gargash's career establishing her firmly in the literary canon (McCafferty, 2012). In 2010 the novel was selected by Muqtanayati's exhibition as one of the one hundred objects that were considered the best in the various fields of artistic creativity (Brown, 2010). It has been adapted into a movie that will be produced by Alessandra Priante, the prominent producer. The Oscar-nominated writer Annemarie Jacir has written the script of the movie and it will be distributed by MAD Solutions, the outstanding Arabian company for the marketing of films (Newbould, 2014).

2.0 Patriarchal Dominance and Problems in Noora's Life

As discussed above, the protagonist in *The Sand Fish*, Noora Al-Salmi, as a young girl was as free as her brothers in her mountainside village home under her father's protection. Patriarchal dominance in her life entered surreptitiously when her younger brother, Sager, started taking charge of the home because their father was potentially insane. She fights back because her brother's dominance was not to her liking. The issue comes to a boil after their father disappears in the mountains, never to return, and Sager worries about her future since she was a woman, vulnerable and insecure. He finds a match for her with the help of a witch-healer, but the man he finds was an old man already with two wives. Sager put pressure on Noora to accept the old man as her future husband since the fellow was rich. Noora is dismayed at her brother's patriarchal attitude, imposing his decisions on her. Once again, she fights back, and in protest runs away from home to her aunt. There she meets a young man, Rashid, who falls in love with her. He gives her hopes of marriage. But her hopes are shattered as Rashid ditches her under pressure from his mother who wants him to marry his cousin. This was the second patriarchal blow to Noora as Rashid, being a man, had the power to say 'no' to their potential marriage, whereas she, being a woman, had no say in it. Emotionally broken, she doesn't even fight back. She returns home and brokenheartedly agrees to marry the old man her brother had fixed her marriage to. This was the third blow to her dignity as her gender and poverty made her a muted creature. In her new life with her husband, Jassem, she felt threatened at every step as her husband was a strong patriarch, having the power to control his three wives. Moreover, he is impotent but wants a child with her. Noora yearns for freedom from this oppressive atmosphere.

In *The Sand Fish*, patriarchal power also flows from a matriarchal figure who is equally powerful as the patriarch. Lateefa, Jassem's first wife, treats Noora as a child and makes her follow her dictates. The power of the matriarch is derived from the patriarchal system that works to the disadvantage of anyone without an agency or voice, such as Noora. It is a system of exploitation founded on absolute rights to some individuals, and only limited rights to others, particularly females. It is because of the system of exploitation that Noora always finds herself in a situation where she is forced to do things she doesn't want to do. She has no choice. She cannot refuse anything she doesn't like, or go for the things she likes.

2.1 Resistance and Struggle

The narrative in *The Sand Fish* presents a complex sketch of the character of the protagonist. There are occasions when Noora strongly resists her oppression and

subordination by men, but on the other hand, there are times when she give in and makes compromises for survival, or rather displays complicity in her subordination to men. So, it wouldn't be justified to put Noora's actions in the straitjacket of either 'struggle for freedom' or 'complicity in her unfreedom.' She acts in accordance with the situation, her powers, and the potential consequences for her life, and thus strikes a balance. Her resistance to patriarchal forces around her aligns her with the feminist activists in the Arab region, while her compromises represent the strategies for survival under unfavourable circumstances. First, let me throw some light on how certain actions of Noora represent an open defiance to patriarchal norms in her community. Noora's defiance of patriarchy and traditional values is clearly visible in her insistence on listening to her heart in matters of love. She falls in love two times, defying the established tradition, once in girlhood before her marriage, and the second time in her adult life after her marriage. Under both the circumstances she puts herself at risk.

Rebellion against injustice and assertion of equality are visible in Noora's character from the very beginning. She always fought for equal treatment with her brother. Her brother refuses to share his 'men talk' with her, so she refuses to work hard like a man: "“Noora stretched her arms above her head and, mid-yawn, said, “I don't know. If you don't want to tell me your man talk, then maybe I shouldn't be doing your man work”” (42). Zobaida, the witch-healer, describes Noora as “different—headstrong, wild” (55). Noora is much ahead of her time in asserting that she was no different from men, her brothers, and therefore, had every right to stay at her native place and her home, not to marry against her wishes, while her brother has no force in his argument, so, takes recourse to the traditional notion of superiority of man over woman as regards social security: ““We are men. It's different.” After a while, he had ignored her, only waving her arguments to the side with a curt statement. “I'm responsible for you. I decide”” (88). She wonders how men assume authority over women because of their gender. For example, she noticed that her brothers changed drastically in her absence from the house, within a short span of time: “She heard Aboud and Hamoud and looked up. She had even tried to convince them that they needed her, but somehow, while she was in Maazoolah, they had grown into small men, mindful of the decision-making powers their sex granted them” (89).

Noora's love affair with Rashid is in itself an act of defiance against the mainstream ideology that forbids love affairs. She goes to meet him every day, well-knowing that “she would be disgraced if she were found out” (63). She is also aware of the punishment the society has determined for such acts and wonders “how the villagers might punish her. Would they lock her up? Would they beat her? Or would they simply send her back to her brother, let her carry her shame to

her home?” (63) Yet, she flouts all rules. Equally defiant is she in her brazen love affair with Hamad, her husband’s servant at home. In defiance of the established patriarchal norms for a woman to be happy in whatever conditions she is forced to live, even if she is married to an impotent man, she established a relationship with Hamad and carried his child. Noora is reminded time and again that she must be thankful that she is married to a rich man, but the thought is revolting to her. She cannot accept the fact that she has been deceived and robbed of her pleasure. Noora’s resentment against her brother Sager is very strong as she held him responsible for her wretched marriage. She feels betrayed when she doesn’t like the atmosphere in her new house and her life: “How could he sell her off to some stranger like that?” (139). She also resents that she has literally lost her voice in her new life as she tells Yaqoota: “You know,” she said, “I wasn’t always this quiet. I used to have a voice louder than yours.” “Louder than mine?” Yaqoota said. “Not possible” (143).

But, at the same time, on occasions, Noora turns tame and though at heart she is a rebel, she becomes a woman of compromises for the practicalities of life. For instance, when Rashid came back to her with an excuse not to marry her, she raised no revolt as such: ““She wanted to grab his shoulders and shake the passion back into him. But her limbs went numb, and the tears snuck out of the corners of her eyes. “What about me?” she managed to whisper. “How can you leave me like this?”” (82). The same Noora, who seems to be all out against her patriarchal subjugation, becomes rather complicit in her subjugation on the practical aspects of life.

3.0 Complicity in Subordination

Women’s struggle for freedom from patriarchal dominance acquires startlingly confusing dimensions when critics note that for several reasons women are found to be actively complicit in the reinforcement of their subordination and slavery to men. For example, in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, it is women whose complicity in their own subordination and oppression by men leads to the perpetuation of the system of oppression (Callaway 2008). The tale fits well to the prevalent social conditions in the Arab world (Heath 2018; Sainato & Skojec 2017), where women are deprived of some of rights and are treated as slaves of men and as mere reproductive machines. Why do women accept a subordinate position to men? And the disturbing fact, as notes Simone de Beauvoir (1949), is that women’s complicity is more commonplace than one may imagine. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir shows that women not only willingly embrace their unfreedom but also defend their status as slaves of men (Beauvoir 667). The

interesting question has been explored by feminist critics from differing standpoints. Susan James (2003), as notes Charlotte Knowles (2019), for instance, “interprets women’s complicity in their unfreedom in terms of seventeenth-century accounts of slavery and republican freedom, which emphasizes the dependent situation of women as the primary cause of their complicity”¹ (Knowles 242), while Charlotte Knowles (2019) argues that though Susan James is right in her analysis, still Simone de Beauvoir’s (1949) interpretation that women actively embrace their unfreedom, even if they are financially/socially independent, is more compelling. Knowles, in her analysis of the question ‘why women choose unfreedom,’ gives equal weight to coercive social setting where a subject (such as Noora in *The Sand Fish*) has no option but to be complicit in her unfreedom, and the active role some subjects play in their unfreedom and act, at their free will, to reinforce, rather than resist, their unfreedom. Knowles (2019) defines complicity as “the way in which an agent can help to reinforce or perpetuate their own unfreedom” (242). She further explains that her definition “should be distinguished from more legalistic understandings of complicity, and that her concern is with the way agents can directly contribute to their own unfreedom” (260). Going by Knowles’ definition of complicity, Noora Al-Salmi in *The Sand Fish* displays a compliant behaviour that reinforces her subordination to the men she lives with, before and after her marriage, and offers very little hope for women who struggle for freedom, especially women in the Arab world. Yet, Noora’s complicity is not a ready embrace of her unfreedom but an outcome of the coercive social conditions that leave no other options for her. In the next sub-sections, I shall dwell on the two most significant coercive social conditions that, in my opinion, forced Noora’s complicity in her subjugation, namely, economic dependence and social insecurity.

3.1 Economic Security/Dependence on Men

Noora’s complicity in her unfreedom emerges only after her marriage since before her marriage she displays a rebellious attitude towards all social restriction, as we have discussed above. Her marriage, though not to her liking, has provided her economic security she badly needed. She spent her girlhood days under harsh conditions, overpowered by deprivation. She is illiterate and possesses only little skills for survival, such as sewing and cooking, which are insufficient for economic independence. She was constantly reminded of her precarious situation in life, and therefore to accept her husband as the all-powerful patriarch. For example, Gulsom, one of the matchmakers who came to her hut to prepare her for the wedding, says, “Not everyone gets the chance to please a man as rich and prominent as the one you’re about to marry” (9). The idea was to crush the trace of an independent woman, if there was any left, in her. Even her body was turned into

an object to be prepared for the consumption of a rich man: “But they had already moved to other parts of her body, kneading and handling her as if working a piece of dough to the right consistency. One pair of hands clutched the back of her neck; the other rubbed her back” (11). She was repeatedly infused with the notion that a woman’s job was taking care of the home, and to please her husband, “Cooking and cleaning...,” said Sakina. “Mind you, all the while looking beautiful” (12). A woman cannot think for herself, and can never show signs of arrogance before her husband: “If your head grows big and you become spoiled, your husband might throw you out. Out! And then you’ll have nowhere to go” (13). The phrase ‘nowhere to go’ is repeated to her several times and it acquired a special, frightening, significance for her, as she remembered the matchmakers’ warning to her, “They had insisted she keep her husband happy. “If he doesn’t want you, he can kick you out,” Gulsom had warned” (146). It is only in the backdrop of such economic deprivation that we can grasp why Noora prefers to spend her life in the home where she lives almost like a prisoner. She is well aware that she has nowhere to go if she leaves, or is forced to leave, the security of that virtual prison, and therefore develops complicity to her repressive husband’s attitude. She has to take extremely careful steps and carve out a safe niche for herself within the four walls of that confinement. The same economic reasons for her complicity get highlighted if we look at her in contrast to Shamsa in the same household. Shamsa, the second wife of Jassem, hails from a well-to-do family and her father is ready to support her. After she lost her worth in Jassem household, she chose to be free and sought divorce from Jassem, though it’s a different issue that her freedom may not be very enjoyable to her since she has to depend upon her parental family.

Noora expresses her complicity in her unfreedom on several occasions in the course of the narrative. For instance, Hamad, her young lover with whom she conceives her child, advises her to leave Jassem household and elope with him, but she flatly refuses the offer citing the economic reasons:

“Leave. And take you with me.”

Noora lost patience. Once again, he was being foolish. “You can leave if you want, but I am not leaving,” she said matter-of-factly. “I’m not happy here, but I have a place to live in. I have a bed to sleep in, my own room. I have food and water. I have security. Out there, I would have nothing.” (183)

On another, similar occasion, she voices her concern more forcefully:

“You think you can just come and take me wherever you want, whenever you decide?” She rooted her fists to her hips and pushed out the roundness

of her tummy. “And what about my situation? How can I travel with you, with this child I am carrying? You know I’m with child, don’t you?” (205)

To sound her disagreement with her potential, but dangerous, freedom more forceful, she even denies to Hamad that she was carrying his child, though she knew very well she was telling a deliberate lie.

“It is my child.”

There. He said it.

Noora stiffened. The secret was out, but to admit it would let loose a whole string of problems. “What are you talking about?”

“I said, I know it’s my child,” he said, his voice barely louder than a whisper.

“It is not your child!” She spat the words as if she had just tasted a rotten piece of meat. “It’s Jassem’s.” (205-6)

Thus, it is total dependence upon her husband that prevents Noora from seeking freedom from her unsatisfactory life with him, even when she has a chance to do so.

3.2 Social Insecurity

The other major factor contributing to Noora’s complicity in her unfreedom is lack of security for women in her community. The society Noora belongs to is not at all safe for women, especially single women, so, there is no other course of action for women but to take refuge under the protection of a strong (especially economically strong) man and become complicit in their oppression. The situation for women in such an insecure environment mirrors the classic case of ‘voluntary slave,’ as observes Knowles (2019): “The classic case of complicity is the rarefied example of the voluntary slave, who chooses to adopt a way of life that alienates them from their own freedom” (242). The Arabian desert, as depicted in *The Sand Fish* and also reported in research articles (e.g. Sabban 2019; Hopper 2015; Gordon 1989), is specifically ill-reputed to be a safe haven for kidnappers, the Bedouin slave traders who would daringly kidnap free-roaming people and sell them into the slave market. Maha Gargash provides a good account of this threat to poor women’s lives, especially during the time the novel is set in, i.e. the 1950s, and though Gargash’s account is fictional, it is founded on facts. So, looked at the events from that perspective, Noora’s course of action for her freedom would be an act of madness. Abduction was a constant threat to the lives of young women in the Arab region. For instance, to subdue the slave girl Yaqoota, Lateefa time and again threatens her of abduction if she left the Jassem household:

“And if you continue in this way,” said Lateefa, “I’ll throw you out to wander the nights in Leema. See if you can survive! See if someone doesn’t pick you up and carry you off to the desert. See if you like being someone else’s slave!” (133)

The important point is that social insecurity (the threat of abduction in this case) affects men and women differently, and among women too, it may affect women from wealthy households quite differently from women from poor backgrounds. Beauvoir takes this factor into consideration in her analysis of women’s complicity in their unfreedom since, to Beauvoir, women’s situation in the society is a crucial factor in their complicity. By ‘situation’ of women the philosopher means the external factors, such as their material conditions (less resources at their disposal, lesser opportunities for paid work, etc.) as well as their own self-perception (their self-image, their situating themselves against others, etc.). Psychologically speaking, human existence is, in many ways, relational as every human being experiences various phenomena differently in relation to others. Knowles (2019) in this regard adds that two people occupy different situation even if living in the same physical environment: “a woman walking down a street may feel threatened, or find herself constantly having to dodge out of other people’s way, whereas a man walking down the same street may stride confidently along the pavement without having any of these experiences” (Knowles 244). Based on an analysis of the situation of Arab women in general (in fictional as well as non-fictional accounts), and of poor Arab women, such as Noora, in particular, we can surmise that in the face of a constant threat to their security in the streets, women found it better to become complicit in their unfreedom, even if they spent their lives at home under oppressive conditions.

3.3 Complicity of the Matriarch

An interesting factor that plays a significant role in the perpetuation of patriarchy and comes up prominently in *The Sand Fish* is delegation of powers by the patriarchal figure to his chosen woman who functions as a matriarch, and thus, helps him in his repressive mechanism against other women in the household. Lateefa, the first wife of Jassem and who was his own age, functions as a matriarch in the family entrusted to keep order in the household with three women. Lateefa is not only complicit in her own subordination to her man, but also helps bring other two wives’ complicity to his rule. Her particular target was young Noora because she felt that Noora was untamed and prone to rebellion. Lateefa has imbibed women’s oppression as a cultural necessity, believing, and making the younger generation of women believe, that women’s good future lies in the safety of the

four walls of a house provided by [rich] men, however harsh they may be towards women. To Lateefa, patriarchy as an ideology is a successful system to maintain order in society, essential for the well-being of all. She has taken it up on herself to train Noora in the ways of the house. On their journey from Noora's village to Wadeema, she weaves vivid pictures of their husband, Jassem, as an honorable patriarch, in contrast to the rough sailors in the crew who are "donkeys" to her as she comments on the singing of a sailor, Sangoor: "That donkey's bray again," Lateefa muttered and fumbled out from under the blanket. "Now, where are we?" (100). Lateefa's complicity in the perpetuation of patriarchal power in Jassem household is an outcome of her own power position in the house. She has the power to dictate terms to other women, the younger wives, in the house. She is curious to see Noora pregnant as soon as possible (134) because Lateefa feels she is one with Jassem, the patriarch, in ruling the household as a grandmotherly woman. When Noora enters her new house for the first time, Lateefa instructs Yaqoota to train her for her daily jobs in the household: "Show her our ways. Everything. You see, she doesn't know how we do things here, in a proper house" (114).

'Proper house' here not only means a house with basic amenities and facilities, but also a house run on the principles of propriety of behaviour in accordance with patriarchal/matriarchal norms, that forbids women to behave in ways considered 'improper' from the mainstream ideological standpoint, including speech without proper accent. On one occasion Lateefa rebukes Noora for her improper 'mountain' accent, drawing a sharp line between acceptable and unacceptable:

"And speak properly!"

It was not the first time Noora had heard those words. Ever since that one time Lateefa had met her at the matchmakers' house, she had insisted that Noora drop her mountain accent.

The tent hollered again. "Why do you talk funny anyway, clicking your words like that?"

How could the older woman be thinking of straightening her words at a time like this? "That's how we all talk, Ommi Lateefa."

"Well, you'll have to start talking our way, you know. Otherwise everyone will think you are stupid." (96).

Lateefa is a woman whose understanding is that a woman's place in a house is only as a mother, established by giving her husband an heir, although Lateefa's own position is secure, even without being a mother, since she is one with the patriarch. But, in contrast, Noora and Shamsa would gain any worth only through

motherhood. Once Noora showed the signs of pregnancy, Shamsa lost her worth in the house and seeks divorce. The situation makes Noora shudder: “A woman’s place in a household could be determined only by what she could provide. And Shamsa, it seemed, had nothing to give. Shamsa had first fled with Noora’s arrival, and now she was fleeing again with this pregnancy” (198). So, the only strategy for survival was to be complicit in the patriarchal rule, and that is what Lateefa has managed to do. The patriarch wanted a child in the house, and she managed to fulfill his wish through Noora. It was Lateefa who arranged for the development of a flourishing love between Hamad and Noora. It was she who managed that Jassem drop his plans to visit India, send her, Noora, Hamad, and Yaqoota to the desert, and then on various pretexts send Noora and Hamad back home very day so that they have a chance to meet in privacy, enjoy each other’s company. Lateefa knows that Jassem is unable to produce a child, so, it has to be managed through a young fellow like Hamad. In any case, the child will get Jassem’s name as father, as Hamad puts it to Noora: “Lateefa saw the wild in you. She planned it all, so that you and I could be together, so that you can have a child for her and Jassem” (206). Lateefa knows for sure that Noora wasn’t pregnant with Jassem’s child, yet she makes it up in such a way that the society would accept it as his child, and she uses her secret knowledge to subdue Noora: “I know things,” the older woman said, “and you would be wise to listen to me when I tell you to” (194). Lateefa maintains a stronghold over Noora, the childbearing woman in the house, and holds her secret to her bosom, that in case Noora turns against her, she could use this secret to silence her.

The point of significance in Lateefa’s case is that she may enjoy the feeling of superiority over other women in the house, in reality she is not the one in charge of the house; ultimately, it is Jassem who is in charge, even to justify Lateefa’s existence in the household. Lateef merely enjoys being his ‘Other’ since, as a woman, she doesn’t display the capability to entertain a freedom “that must invent its goals without help” (Beauvoir 1949, p. 10). This brings us to ponder over the existential aspect in women’s complicity in their unfreedom, that is, accepting the position of being the ‘Other’ of men at the cost of their freedom.

4.0 Limits of Women’s Freedom

Both Noora and Lateefa in *The Sand Fish* are complicit in their own subordination to their husband, thus raising a serious question to their attempts for a struggle for freedom. In fact, the title of the narrative “The Sand Fish,” and the related authorial viewpoint that the protagonist Noora learns from her harsh experiences that for survival in the world dominated by patriarchal forces, she has to avoid banging her head against rocks and hurt herself, like the sand fish (a skink) she witnessed

hurting itself in the rough mountains, are indicative of women devising strategies for their survival, such as complicity in their own dominance, since to them struggle for escape seems leading to nowhere. If we go by Simone de Beauvoir's analysis, the situation is rather less political and more existential in nature, potentially an existential dread. The existential dread in women, to a large extent, defines their material and social conditions leading them to accept being the 'Other' in relation to men, passive objects with reference to men beings the active subjects, as explicates Beauvoir: "She determines and differentiates herself in relation to man, and he does not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the subject, he is the absolute. She is the Other" (1949, p. 6). Thus, it is no surprise that Lateefa and Noora do not reject their status in Jassem household as the 'Others' in relation to the active subject position of their husband Jassem, rather, they happily embrace their passivity, being well aware that he treats them as material objects in his household. Sonia Kruks (1987), commenting on Beauvoir's analysis of complicity of women, writes that a woman's acceptance of her 'otherness' denies her humanity and effectively suppresses her freedom (115).

But, some feminist critics (e.g. Knowles 2019; Bauer 2006; Holland & Huntington 2001; Graybeal 1990) feel that Beauvoir's analysis of women's complicity in their unfreedom in *The Second Sex* is less influenced by Sartrean existentialism and more by Martin Heidegger's philosophy of 'Being.'ⁱⁱ Holland & Huntington (2001), for instance, say that "Heidegger's deliberately suprapolitical corpus allows feminist theorists to engage and learn from his thought" (p. 2). Graybeal (1990) observes that many women in the academia, particularly in their younger days, feel great kinship with Heidegger. The reason for the orientation is that Heidegger's thought overcomes metaphysics and takes young women closer to the lost feminine style of existence. The patriarchal ideology is metaphysics-based, that is to say, it heavily relies on "meaning in life" the fountain source of which is metaphysics, as for example, the idea of right and wrong. The protagonist in *The Sand Fish*, Noora, now and then transcends the metaphysical patriarchal ideology. Two occasions are particularly relevant to our discussion. The first instance occurs when Noora is with her lover Rashid at the subterranean pond. After a funny scuffle they end up in the pond, Noora with her wet cloths stuck to her skin and Rashid taking her in his arms. She enjoys the moment and feels it was right, though she knows it was wrong. The second instance occurs after her marriage. She is once again with her lover, Hamad. She bumps into him and hits her head badly. To soothe her spirits, Hamad plants a kiss on her forehead: "And then he leaned closer. She felt his *ghitra* brush her cheek. And on her bruise, he placed his lips and held them there. It seemed right, even though she knew it was wrong, and Noora closed her eyes" (172). It wouldn't be wrong to claim that feeling 'the

incidents were right,' Noora was trying to overcome the metaphysical reference to meaning in her life and recovering her lost feminine being. Given the situation, her complicity in her seemingly subordinate status to Hamad is, in fact, not acceptance of a secondary status in relation to his primary status, but defiance to patriarchy with an active support of Hamad.

5.0 Conclusion: Women's Resistance: A Lost Struggle?

To sum up, the narrative sequence and an analysis of the central character, Noora, in *The Sand Fish* present a complex situation. The narrative represents the life-history of an Arab woman engaged in constant struggle against patriarchal oppression, but at the same time, the character of the protagonist also represents a change in attitude towards struggle and preference for making compromises for survival. Noora resists patriarchal influence in her life only before marriage, whereas, after her marriage to a rich man, she largely displays complicity in her subordination, though her complicity is an outcome of her material and social constraints. One of the primary objectives of feminism is to expose the numerous male mechanisms to justify male subordination of females. One such mechanism is to obtain women's complicity in their own unfreedom, and feminist critics have begun understanding the phenomenon, as writes Exum, J. Cheryl (1995): "... feminist criticism also seeks to understand women's complicity in their own subordination: What factors have encouraged women to accept a subordinate position and how have women both adapted to and resisted the constraints of a world where men are in charge?" (65). Complicity of women in their unfreedom presents itself in two different facets. Noora's complicity is largely owing to her material circumstances. Lateefa, on the other hand, shows complicity with the feeling of being one with the patriarch. Both the facets of complicity of women in their subordination are symptomatic of women's lost struggle against patriarchy (Lopes 2019; Manne 2017) writing on the rise of women-led movements reinstating patriarchal practices in the name of feminism.

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NOTES

ⁱ James declares that: “I offer a reading of *The Second Sex* that places it in the context of an older tradition of philosophical inquiry into the characters of social hierarchy and into the passions that create and sustain it. Since the tradition is a long one, I only attempt to discuss a part of it, although it is a part with which Beauvoir was undoubtedly familiar. In French philosophy of the late seventeenth century, I show, hierarchical social relations are widely held to depend on the effects of admiration and contempt.” (2003, p. 152)

ⁱⁱ Nancy Bauer (2006), for example, explicates Heideggerian connection in *The Second Sex*, particularly regarding the term ‘mitsein,’ roughly translated in English as “being-with.” Summarily, Bauer’s idea is that Beauvoir’s project in *The Second Sex* is to explain why women have trouble when they try to become full members of the human race, equal to men.