

# *Balcony of Disgrace: The Intersection of Patriarchy and Honor in Arab Societies*

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## Abstract

The paper explores the complex issue of patriarchal principles that shape the socialization of men in Arab societies, where the criterion for masculinity is deeply rooted in adherence to cultural norms. Through the lens of Nasrallah's novel *Balcony of Disgrace* (2010), the study analyzes the impact of the societal concept of honor on male identity and the difficult choices faced by men in such societies. The novel highlights the oppressive nature of patriarchal societies, which link male honor with female sexuality and legitimize the murder of women to preserve man's image. The paper argues that patriarchal oppression not only extends to women but also to men who face public criticism for not conforming to patriarchal norms. The study aims to fill the gap in the existing literature on honor killings by highlighting the crises of both male and female identities. Overall, this paper provides a critical analysis of the impact of patriarchal norms on male identity and the societal consequences of gender-based violence in Arab societies.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Arab Society, Masculinity, Honor Killing, Male Identity, Cultural Norms

## 1. Introduction

In a world where the fabric of society is often woven with deeply entrenched patriarchal threads, understanding how this influences the identity and choices of men in Arab societies is critical. This paper delves into these complex dynamics through an incisive analysis of Nasrallah's *Balcony of Disgrace* (2010), unraveling the interplay between cultural norms of honor and masculinity. The novel portrays a male-dominated community that legitimizes the murder of women to preserve a man's image and honor, and thus critiques patriarchal societies' linkage of male honor with female sexuality. Therefore, this paper asserts that women in patriarchal societies are under significant historical oppression and argues that patriarchal oppression extends to men by placing their masculinity under public criticism if they do not conform to patriarchal norms.

A significant number of studies on the subject of honor killings are inadequate in their examination of the issue (Kozma, 2011; Al-Samman, 2010; Raza, 2016; Aziz, 2019; Badran, 1988), as these studies tend to present honor killings as a crisis of female identity, overlooking the fact that it is also a crisis of masculine identity. Therefore, this study aims to understand and articulate the culture that promotes and perpetuates this double-sided oppression.

## 2. Methodology

The methodology of this paper is a critical and thematic analysis, mainly centered on the literary analysis of Ibrahim Nasrallah's *'Balcony of Disgrace'* (2010). This analysis is further made through a literature review on patriarchy, honor crimes, and masculinity within Arab societies. The study employs an interdisciplinary approach, integrating insights from gender studies, sociology, and literary criticism to explore the complex interplay between societal norms and individual identity.

## 3. The Interplay Between Men's Vulnerability and the Oppression of Women

In the Arab region, the community's collective identity is closely tied to customs and traditions. This collective identity (Ghassub, Mayy, & Sinclair-Webb, 2006, pp. 17-18) serves as the foundation for the prescribed roles and behaviors of both men and women. Both men and women are expected to comply with traditional gender roles. Men are expected to be strong, masculine, and protective (Sultana, 2012, p. 3) and (Suleiman, 1978, p. 357). In contrast, women are expected to be 'hidden, low-profile' (Faqr 69), weak, submissive, and pure (Sharawi, 2011, p. X). These traditional gender roles in the Arab region are simply a reflection of the patriarchal society that reinforces the notion of male dominance and female inferiority. De Beauvoir (1989) emphasizes that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' affirming the role of the society on the making and breaking of women (273).

Failing to adhere to these expectations results in damaging one's honor (Al Qahtani, 2022, p. 1). Men in these societies are often subject to greater scrutiny and accountability than women. Men are expected to control 'their' women otherwise they lose their social face (Gruenbaum, 2001, p. 41; Moore, 2011, p. 4; Ahmed, 1999, pp. 100-101). Similarly, there are different standards for a man's honor and a woman's honor. Different aspects dishonor men and women; the preservation of female chastity is seen as a defining aspect of feminine identity, Faqir highlights this by stating that 'girls and women can sully their family's honor and destroy their reputation' (69). Whereas sexuality is not considered a defining aspect of masculine identity (Faqir, 2001, p. 69) and (Abu Odeh, 2010, p. 917), in contrast, a man's reaction to a female relative's violation of the honor code is closely monitored, controlled and considered a defining aspect of masculine identity. In this context, Abu Odeh explains that 'male performance is equally sanctioned by penalties. If a man does not intervene by killing his sister or wife once she has shamed him, he suffers a loss of his gender: he is no longer considered a man' (p. 919).

#### 4. Literature Review

The phenomenon of 'honor killing' in this context refers to the act of murder committed by family members against females, suspected of violating the perceived honor of the family. In the words of Abu Odeh (2010), such honor killers believe that 'only [...] bleeding in death can erase the shame brought about by her failure to bleed in sex on her wedding night' (p. 917). This issue is complex and multifaceted, with its roots deeply entrenched in patriarchal societal norms and expectations. The concept of honor, in this lens, is closely tied to the actions and conduct of female relatives rather than the male members of the family (Faqir, 2001, p. 69; Mansour, 2021, p. 61).

While the siege on women may initially seem rooted in social honor, a deeper analysis reveals it is driven by men's persistent anxiety and fear. This stems from the oppressive nature of patriarchal societies, that threaten their masculine reputation and perceived superiority over women. Indeed, a consensus among theorists has emerged that the underlying cause for the subjugation of women and the imposition of limitations upon them is rooted in men's perceived vulnerability. El Saadawi, among others concurs with this assumption. She asserts that such enforcement undermines the myth of male superiority and the concept of female weakness. The dominance exerted by men over women is indicative of their recognition of women's innate strength and the need for oppressive measures to protect against this perceived threat (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 100). El Saadawi further adds that 'Arab men [...] cannot tolerate an experienced and intelligent woman. It would seem as though the man is afraid of her because of her capacity to understand him and see through his failures, or weaknesses' (El Saadawi, 1990, p. 77). Huda Sharawi echoes El Saadawi's argument, she believes that conservative men's attitude toward educated women underscores a deep fear about women's empowerment and their potential for greater power. Sharawi (2017, p. 18) underscores this belief by asking, 'What are the implications that conservative men fear? Do [they] want to destroy all educated women, rendering them all ignorant? Are they afraid that their country's growth will occur under the auspices of women not men?'

Similarly, Millett reveals that men's anxiety about losing power over women creates a dynamic of social politics that necessitates the oppression of women. This dynamic stereotypes women, assigning them qualities such as 'passivity, ignorance, docility, 'virtue,' and inefficiency' (Millett, 2005, p. 26). She argues that although 'Politics' is ostensibly about arranging the lives of people, it is often used to denote the dominance of one sex over the other (Millett, Year, p. 24). Millett further adds that the sexual relationship between men and women transcends the interaction between two individuals; 'this is so because our society, like all historical civilizations, is a patriarchy [...] every avenue of power within the society [...] is entirely in male hands' (Millett, 2005, p. 23). Irigarai, furthermore, sheds light on the interplay between patriarchal beliefs and the vulnerability of men, which has profound implications for the oppression of women. In her examination, she underscores the relationship between patriarchal ideologies and the ways women are subjugated and limited. Irigarai asserts that patriarchal philosophy is based on the notion that women are inherently castrated individuals with inadequate genitalia. This belief leads to the perception of women as inferior and unequal (Irigaray, 1974, p. 25).

Cixous' analysis underscores the relationship between the perpetuation of norms that restrict women's self-expression and autonomy, and men's weakness. Her examination highlights how the historical taboos and norms surrounding the recognition and identification of women's bodies, sexuality, and desires have contributed to obscuring their identity and value. Consequently, the reinforcement of these norms serves as a demonstration of the interplay between men's weakness and the oppression of women (Cixous & Cohen, 1976, p. 891). Cixous' assertion aligns with Showalter's perspective that the subjugation of women and the imposition of limitations upon them are rooted in men's vulnerability. Showalter argues that the cultural belief in the lesser value of a woman's body contributes to the notion of female inferiority. This extends to the idea that women are intellectually inferior and incapable of competing with men in any domain, including cognitive abilities. Such a cultural viewpoint, according to Showalter, reflects men's vulnerability; they are unable to accept and acknowledge the inherent equality between the sexes. This leads to the reinforcement of norms that restrict women's self-expression and autonomy (Showalter, 1981, pp. 76-80). Last but not least, Julia Kristeva believes the current progress toward promoting women's rights and equality may be seen as a mere illusion (Kristeva, 1995, p. 21) until men confront and overcome their underlying fears and insecurities. She advocates for the emergence of a new generation (Kristeva, 1995, p. 23) capable of reinventing alternative definitions of human identity and deconstructing the binary oppositions between different groups, including the sexes. Kristeva believes that such a shift could lead to demassification and the resolution of conflicts arising from differences (Kristeva, 1995, p. 34).

#### 5. To Be a Man or not To Be

In *Balcony of Disgrace*, Ibrahim Nasrallah vividly portrays how society handles incidents of so-called 'honor killing.' The novel unfolds the tragic story of Amin, a man who is coerced by his community and close relatives into murdering his sister, Manar, due to her loss of virginity, in a bid to preserve his social status and masculinity. Nasrallah intricately narrates the parallel lives of Amin and Manar,

shedding light on the starkly contrasting restrictions imposed on men and women in Arab society. The novel emerges as a powerful critique of the societal norms that precipitate such tragic events and underscores the urgent need for a paradigm shift in societal attitudes towards women.

It is commonly assumed that the primary focus of *'Balcony of Disgrace'* is the portrayal of women as victims of the patriarchal society (Abu Dwaih, 2019; Jarar, 2015; Al-Hawary, 2020; Sallhut, 2010). However, a more comprehensive examination of the text reveals that the novel also delves into the complexities surrounding men as victims of societal expectations and traditional practices. Nasrallah portrays various male characters, highlighting the weaknesses and limitations they encounter in resisting and challenging the patriarchal system. These portrayals of male vulnerability (Were, 2004, p. 2) are crucial to the novel's exploration of the interplay between societal expectations, gender roles, and the tragic consequences of rigid adherence to such parochial norms.

On one hand, *'Balcony of Disgrace'* depicts characters who challenge patriarchal structures, such as Abu Amin, Anwar, and Abdul Raouf as disabled, immature, or ostracized by their community. In this context, Abu Amin's physical disability, reminiscent of the blind pianist in Angela Carter's *'The Bloody Chamber'* (1979), serves more as a metaphor for these characters' metaphorical shortcomings rather than their actual physical limitations. Similarly, Anwar's immaturity is portrayed as a representation of an incomplete masculinity, as defined by patriarchal traditions.

Furthermore, Abdel Raouf's detachment from his family and community in *'Balcony of Disgrace'* is interpreted as a manifestation of his disconnection from traditional societal values and a prioritization of personal gain (Kaufman, 1987, p. 6). Were argues that patriarchal norms in society are often a source of dissatisfaction for men. Conventional expectations associated with masculinity have been shown to restrict personal fulfilment and satisfaction. This traditional notion of masculinity engenders a sense of disappointment due to the constraints it imposes on males. Were further posits that there is a growing recognition of the limitations that the traditional masculine role and self-concept impose on personal fulfilment. This argument suggests that patriarchy has historically been inadequate in ensuring personal fulfilment for men, as it denies them the opportunity for individual self-expression (Were, 2004, p. 13).

*'Balcony of Disgrace'* presents the negative effects of detachment through the character of Abdel Raouf. His disregard for others, exemplified by his refusal to heed his father's pleas for help and his eventual abandonment of his family, demonstrates the dangers of prioritizing personal gain over familial and societal bonds. The narrative underscores the need for a re-evaluation, rather than a complete rejection, of societal norms to cultivate a more equitable society. It recognizes the complexities inherent in familial and societal dynamics. The call-to-action in the novel advocates for challenging oppressive norms while acknowledging the negative impact of community and family in shaping individual identity.

The representation of these characters in *'Balcony of Disgrace'* highlights the impact of patriarchal norms on individuals who deviate from the normative standard of masculinity. Sundberg provides insight into this, elucidating that such characters are 'despised and badly treated because they are different from others, in that their physical and psychological characteristics deviate from normative masculinity. The fate of these male characters emphasizes the rigidity of patriarchy, which shows that it does not only disfavor women, but men as well' (Sundberg, 2011, p. 19).

There is substantial criticism regarding the oppressive effects of patriarchy on men who do not conform to patriarchal ideals. Olivia Guy-Evans highlights the consequences for men who deviate from these expectations, noting that 'if they go against what is expected, they may be ridiculed, bullied, or shamed' (Guy-Evans, 2022, p. 56). Similarly, Veronika Ilich comments on how adherence to traditional patriarchy suppresses men, asserting that 'patriarchy harms men by [...] surrendering their individuality and denying their humanity' (Ilich, 2022, p. 1). Furthermore, traditional notions of masculinity often force men into conformity with societal expectations that may not reflect their true selves, leading to a masking of their authentic identities. Guy-Evans also asserts that patriarchal cultural norms inhibit men's emotional expression, with fear of derision from both male and female members of society. He argues that the idealization of traits such as physical and emotional fortitude, ego, pride, and anger as inherently masculine leads to the socialization of men to repress their emotions and abstain from disclosing them (Guy-Evans, 2022, p. 56).

In contrast, *'Balcony of Disgrace'* depicts characters who have deeply internalized patriarchal ideology and are unable to question its dominant norms and values, such as Uncle Salem and Amin. Uncle Salem, in particular, is a significant figure in this context. His unwavering insistence on the necessity of Manar's murder to uphold social dignity highlights the pervasive nature of violence and subjugation in society driven by patriarchal ideology. In the novel, he urges Amin to murder his sister: "there is not a single man between you, if there is a man, you would have killed her the moment you have known about the incident" (Nasrallah, 2010, p. 67). Through Uncle Salem's character, the author vividly illustrates how entrenched patriarchal values can lead to extreme actions and the perpetuation of systemic violence.

## 6. Patriarchal Ideology and the Archetype of Female Infanticide

The tradition of honor killings extends beyond the act of violence against women; it signifies a broader system of thought and methodology that aims to subordinate women stemming from male inadequacy. Those who adhere to patriarchal ideologies are committed to upholding traditional gender roles, thereby preserving patriarchal dominance. This perspective is seen in Salem's character in the novel, particularly through his opposition to Manar's pursuit of a college education. In a dialogue with Manr's father he did not approve Manar's education: "Abo Manar: I want to send Manar to study at the university. / Uncle Salem: What for? The girls' place is their husband's house. / Abo Manar: I want to be proud of her. / Uncle Salem: (Mad)What? Proud of her? One can't be proud of his daughters. One is

proud of his sons. We will see the result of your deeds” (Nasrallah, 2010, p. 24). In this resonates with El Saadawi assumption that Arab men often view educated and intelligent women as a challenge to their established masculinity. Such a perception of threat is rooted in the fear that these women may have the capacity to understand and expose men’s vulnerabilities or limitations (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 77).

The novel illuminates how patriarchal ideology feeds on the archetype of female infanticide. As Hijab notes, ‘social and cultural traditions have a significant impact on women’s status’ (Hijab, 2001, p. 51). The narrative portrays female infanticide not only a historical practice but also as a continuing reality in various forms in modern times, both literal and metaphorical. Al-Samman discusses how Arab women grapple with an ‘anxiety of erasure’ due to the reality and symbolism of female infanticide (Al-Samman, 2010, p. 73). This is depicted through the metaphorical ‘burial’ of a girl’s potential by limiting her life opportunities, and through more literal examples, such as the murder of Manar, which stands as a stark representation of these themes within the novel.

Through Salem’s character, *'Balcony of Disgrace'* emphasizes the impact of collectivist societal pressure on male relatives when a female is perceived to have violated the honor code. The various actions and methods employed to pressure Amin into committing the crime, such as attacking Abu Amin’s family and placing a black flag on their house, symbolize the societal pressure on these men to restore their honor by resorting to killing. Suad Joseph discusses the significant influence of patriarchy in Arab society, attributing it to the close kinship ties among individuals and its overarching impact on society as a whole. She asserts that patriarchy becomes particularly perilous in such contexts because a person's self-identity is closely intertwined with the community’s perception of them. Joseph states, ‘kinship [...] sustains a person’s sense of self and identity’ (Joseph, 1996, p. 15). In view of this, such perpetrators are placed under immense pressure to maintain their self-respect (Mansour 57), and most likely choose to commit the publicly accepted crime to avoid societal rejection (Kaufman 6). Therefore, patriarchal connectivity and kinship enforce the ways in which gender-based power imbalances. In this aspect, Joseph emphasizes that ‘the connectedness of individuals to each other, ‘patriarchal connectivity’ can emerge. This is the fostering of selves with fluid boundaries who defer to males and elders and understand gender and age privilege in kin and religious terms’ (18).

### 7. Honor Crime, a Binary Form of Crime

It can be irrefutably argued that an honor crime represents a binary form of crime, where both the perpetrator and the victim are oppressed and suffer under patriarchal cultural norms. The perpetrators, conditioned and subjected to systematic societal influences, adopt an identity characterized by a lack of agency and autonomy. This formation of identity results from the complex interplay of biological, social, and psychological factors, as interpreted from the theories of Sigmund Freud (Gumiandari & Nafi’a, 2019, p. 235). The Social construct of masculinity, often associated with dominance, aggression, and the necessity to prove one’s virility and strength, can lead to a belief that violence is the only means to assert oneself and maintain one’s image (Kaufman, 1987, pp. 7-9). El Saadawi emphasizes that this masculine aggression is motivated by a deep-seated fear or terror fueled by a desire to restrain and conquer the inherent vitality and strength within women that are perceived as a potential threat to erupt at any moment (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 100). In this sense, *'Balcony of Disgrace'* posits that Amin’s initial intention is not to murder Manar but rather to conceal the scandal of her pregnancy. However, once the situation becomes known within their community, Amin feels a compelling pressure to take drastic measures to preserve his family’s honor and reputation. Amin’s uncle raised a black flag to place public pressure on Amin to murder Manar: “This flag will be raised at your home until you become men and purify your disgraced honor” (Nasrallah, 2010, p. 82). While this decision is morally reprehensible, it can be contextualized within the cultural and societal pressures that often drive individuals to commit honor killings.

Not only the social pressures and oppressions within conservative communities subjugate women, but they also subjugate men. A salient illustration of this phenomenon in the novel is Uncle Salem’s character, who, by declaring that Amin is not a man, not only emasculates Amin but also acts as a catalyst for the tragic actions Amin ultimately undertakes. These actions stem from Amin’s pursuit of masculinity, which is based on a distorted and misguided understanding of manhood. This dynamic underscores the complex and sophisticated nature of societal pressure and oppression within conservative communities. Here, individuals face oppression not only from societal expectations and laws but also from their peers and family members. The pressure to conform to traditional masculine ideals, especially as imposed by figures like Uncle Salem, can be overwhelmingly devastating for men struggling to assert their own masculinity. The emphasis on upholding traditional ideals, sometimes at the expense of one’s own humanity, highlights the deeply oppressive nature of these communities. It serves as a poignant reminder of the necessity for greater understanding and empathy in examining the social dynamics of conservative cultures. Such an understanding can pave the way for a more inclusive approach that respects individual identities and mitigates the harshness of rigid societal norms.

### 8. Conclusion

In conclusion, Ibrahim Nasrallah’s *'Balcony of Disgrace'* is a profound critique of the societal norms that lead to the tragedy of honor killings in Arab societies. The novel deftly explores the intricacies of gender roles, illustrating both the impact of patriarchal norms on women and the often-overlooked victimization of men through societal expectations and traditional practices. It poignantly underscores the limitations and weaknesses men face when resisting and challenging the patriarchal system, while also delving into the dangers of prioritizing personal gain over familial and societal connections. The portrayal of characters who defy traditional masculinity highlights the rigidity and detrimental effects of patriarchal structures on all individuals. The novel not only illuminates the societal issues and their profound impacts but also calls for a critical reassessment of the traditional oppressive norms. It emphasizes the need to challenge these norms while recognizing the fundamental role of community and family in shaping individual identity. This novel’s critique opens venues for further dialogue and research on achieving a more equitable society, where gender roles are understood and negotiated in more

liberating and humane ways.

It is critical to acknowledge that most men involved in honor crimes, like Amin in *'Balcony of Disgrace'*, are not solely perpetrators but also victims of the societal constructs in which they are raised. These individuals grow up in environments where societal pressure to uphold self-respect through social acceptance is deeply ingrained. Consequently, they are conditioned to believe that certain extreme actions, such as honor killings, are necessary measures to preserve their self-respect and societal acceptance. This understanding is vital as it highlights that these individuals are inherently not malevolent; rather, they are products of a societal system that perpetuates and endorses harmful beliefs and practices. Recognizing this duality is essential in addressing the root causes of such crimes and in developing interventions that can transform these deeply entrenched cultural norms.

In the light of this, while depicting the murderer as a tragic figure ensnared by circumstances, *'Balcony of Disgrace'* also suggests the imperative for individuals to base their self-worth on personal actions and values rather than societal approval. The novel advocates for the development of a community culture that fosters gender equality and empowers individuals to challenge and transcend societal constraints. By promoting such cultural evolution, the community can significantly reduce the prevalence of honor killings and other detrimental practices. This shift entails not only a redefinition of societal norms but also an embrace of individual moral responsibility, encouraging people to critically evaluate the implications of their actions and to strive for a society where gender-based violence is no longer a method for maintaining honor.

In summary, *'Balcony of Disgrace'* acts as a poignant reminder of the catastrophic impact societal pressures can have on self-respect and the urgent necessity for both individuals and communities to liberate themselves from destructive societal norms and beliefs. The novel's intricate portrayal of honor killings not only sheds light on a complex issue but also serves as a compelling call to action. It urges individuals and communities alike to strive towards forging a more just and equitable society, where gender-based violence is not a means to uphold honor but a relic of a bygone era of oppressive norms.

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