

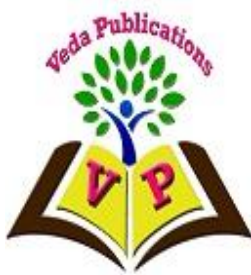


MOHAMMED SUMILI'S MEMORIES RESURRECTED: AN OPEN READING

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[doi:10.333329/joell.7.4.79](https://doi.org/10.333329/joell.7.4.79)



ABSTRACT

Mohammed Sumili's *Memories Resurrected* presents a painful brief story of a young Saudi, his sense of guilt, and confusion over his own affairs in his late adolescence and boyhood. The plot highlights the concerns of women and young men in traditional Saudi society. While the male members control the family, religious volunteers, Mutawwahs, control public space. The story tells the tale of women suppression in a patriarchal society, gender discrimination, and the status of women in a social order where women are exchanged to settle debts. Hasan, a pious young man could not propose his girlfriend, Rawan, because of his religiousness. But the same religious Hassan doesn't dither to establish a relationship with his uncle's neighbor, Sarah. However, when the situation comeback in his life after a few years when her daughter sought to enjoy a pre-marital relationship he considered it an insult and stain on his honor. Hasan like any Saudi male was offended and in an attempt to protect the honor of the family kills her. The disturbed Hasan succumb to his life-long conflicts and commits suicide.

Keywords: Saudi, Tradition, Patriarchal Society, Gender Discrimination, Social Order.



As the novella's title suggests, Mohammed Sumili's work (2010) is a recollection of memories of the protagonist Hassan. We never miss him; instead, we see things through his eyes as he is the narrator and the piece's main character. The novella opens with a sense of loss and bereavement. Hassan's wife, Amel, lies in a hospital struggling for her life and his twenty-year-old daughter, Moona, lying dead. It is a world full with grief where Hassan sits and regrets. The novella is a reminiscence of Hassan's meeting with the women in story whom he refers to as *daughters of Eve*. By bringing into play the image of Eve, Sumili, in the very beginning has set the tone of the novella; it is comprehensible that the women in this story are considered temptresses, who have beguiled men only to bring sorrow upon them as in the Biblical story of Creation and Fall.

According to Kate Millet, this Biblical account connects woman, sex, and sin and constitutes the fundamental pattern of patriarchal thought thereafter. In this background, where women are the cause of human suffering, knowledge, and sin, she needs to carry the feeling of shame. She has to attach herself to man and help him keep his good reputation and honor by her sense of duty and submission. She has to behave respectfully by dedicating herself and her life to the family. The pressure to conform, that is, to forfeit one's desires and preferences for the sake of the family's wishes, is a significant aspect of the patriarchal system. Without a doubt, women remain the most disadvantaged, destitute, and underprivileged in such a state of affairs (Millet, 2016).

Patriarchy manifests itself in diverse forms in different cultures, specific to customs, traditions, and value systems. As the setting of the story is Saudi Arabia, the author pinpoints the nature of patriarchy and describes its features and characteristics in the Kingdom. *Hassan was shocked to see how women who were mostly ignored in Saudi society were considered as the source of their families' honor*. The author strikingly states that women's position in Saudi society is subservient to men, and the role of women is determined by long-established cultural practices that are often sanctioned by law.

"... women are subjected to a 'dual-oppression': one domestic and the other social. This duality leads women to endure intra-antagonisms beyond those experienced by other oppressed groups. ...One could even term this situation 'tamed slavery.' Women are tamed through societal insistence on submissiveness as a desirable feminine trait, a process that privileges men and disempowers women (Abu-Odeh, 2010)."

Sumili also draw attention to the impact of patriarchy on the young minds in such societies. Young Hassan considered girls to be troublesome and source of unhappiness. Not only Hassan but his friend Ali, who is portrayed as more modern and westernized, also has almost the same views about women.

As the story develops, we meet three women with whom Hassan comes in contact first, Rwan, Ali's friend, second Sarah, his uncle's neighbor, and third his daughter, Moona. Though Hassan meets them at different life stages, his opinion regarding women more or less remained the same, he always doubted their integrity. Although women live under the strictest surveillance and protection, her chastity is always suspicious, thus making them potential shame sources. When Hassan first met Rwan with Ali, he thought of her as a promiscuous or immoral woman, when Sarah came borrowing the gas container, he again became *mistrusted her conduct*. He *instantly judged her and thought she is luring him inside*. Later, when he discovers that his daughter is having an affair, he considers her too as unscrupulous and immoral. In all three cases, Hassan skeptically looks at the women's chastity and assassinates their character even before knowing them or the reason for the behavior for which he suspects them.

Another element of such types of patriarchy is violence, physical, emotional, and verbal assault, to maintain the masculine privilege. At times this violence reaches the extent of murdering a woman, intentional or unintentional, generally referred to as 'honor killing' or 'crimes of honor.' In the article



Crimes of honor and the construction of gender in Arab societies, Professor Lama Abu-Odeh explains, "A paradigmatic example of a crime of honor is the killing of a woman by her father or brother for engaging in or being suspected of engaging in, sexual practices before or outside marriage (Abu-Odeh, 2010)."

In this tale, Sumili brings to light this characteristic of patriarchy when the narrator unfolds the episode related to Hassan and her daughter Moona. After Hassan finds out that the two lovers he had suspected of *wrong doings* involved her daughter, he felt like someone was playing with his property. His instant *thought was that her daughter was putting at family's honor*. This realization of loss of family honor compels him to resort to the most conservative reaction, violence. He was so furious that he *wanted to hit Moona hard*. He became ferocious and despised her for deceiving him. He shouted in her face and slapped her with all his might that became fatal for the girl. When hit hard by her father Moona lost her balance and fell down the stairs dying on the spot. Intentionally or unintentionally, Hassan committed the crime of killing her daughter assumably to save his family's honor (Anas, 2011).

The legal system or the agencies implementing the laws obscure the government's responses to the acts of honor killings. The intricacies of the societies where honor killings are practiced are such that police often take the perpetrator's side. They either fail to act or overlook the facts to save the person involved in such acts. Hassan was amazed when the police officers who came investigating the case didn't even bother to visit the scene of crime. The policemen have understood the whole situation and did not want to trouble Hassan by asking further questions. Scrutinizing these gaps by police Amnesty International had observed that often police give preference to customs over the law and instead of providing protection to women from such killings the police often become a collaborator in the crime.

Another facet of honor in the ethic driven society is the treatment of women as a commodity.

Women in such societies are often compared to land, house, or money. Sumili draws attention to this aspect in the story of Sarah, a woman who was married off to settle her father's debt. Moshabbab, who owed money to Sarah's father, struck a deal with her father that if she is married off to him without dowry, he will waive off the loan amount. However, the irony is that even though Sarah was a payoff, she still held the family's reputation and if at any time she wished to divorce Moshabbab she would be *considered immoral by her own family and would lose their love and respect*.

Though women bear the brunt of patriarchy, it is not limited to them. Even the younger male members of the family are required to surrender themselves to the patriarchal authority. Violence and aggression are also used against them to control their behavior, deeds, and action. Young Hassan feared that his father might beat him for listening songs. Institutionalization of patriarchy over the centuries, both women and the young are subordinated to conduct themselves per the norms set up by society. Failing to comply with the same is a matter of shame, not just for the individual but also for the entire family and society.

The structure and relationships of the traditional Arab family are also replicated at other levels of society. While Sumili has used a father's image to show how patriarchy controls the affairs of the things in a family, he has invoked the image of *El-Hi'ah* men or the religious police to show the patriarchal control in the public space. *El-Hi'ah* men in Saudi Arabia are tasked with enforcing 'proper conduct' as defined by the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, a government agency. They are instrumental in creating a disciplinary society. Though the author has criticized their activities in very unambiguous terms, their presence throughout the story is very plain sight. Even though *Hassan considers their acts senseless*, nevertheless, the fears they incur in the minds of people are perceptible. When young Hassan went to pick Ali from the mall and found that a girl was with him, he was frightened and thought that *El-Hi'ah people might catch him and put him in jail*.



During one of the Doha Debates Hussein Shobokshi, a board member of the Mecca Chamber of Commerce observed, "Social discrimination is the greatest of all ailments facing Arab societies today." Today discrimination based on race, religion, ethnicity, gender, tribe, family is deep that it appears absolutely normal to an Arab. Their argument that it's not only in their society but most part of the world is facing such issues is also true; however, the problem lies in the lack of effort to confront it. (Whitaker, 2011).

CONCLUSION

Memories Resurrected portrays Saudi women's image and the rules governing them in the structure of a patriarchal community. Even a casual reading will give enough details to say that females are regarded as second-class citizens in traditional Saudi society. Patriarchal societies promoted two images: women as the sexual property of men and women as chaste mothers of their children. These are reinforced through traditions and religion in the male-dominated cultural construct. The novel shows how male authoritarianism works in society. Women have to depend on their fathers, husbands, and sons for their living. Through social conditioning, the marginalization is internalized in women's mentality. In such societies, when some women choose to assert and live a life of her own, they have to face social and domestic violence and become the victim of a misogynistic society like Moona.

Sumili presents a bleak situation of society. However, in recent times many reforms have taken place. Even though all Saudi women's aspirations have not been addressed, many, including the long pending demand of lifting the ban on women's driving, have been achieved. A study found that Saudi society has undergone significant social and cultural changes related to family structure and marriage styles. There has been a sharp increase in the number of educated women. However, it was observed that the role of women in traditional society had not changed much. The study suggests that this effect was mainly due to limited opportunities for women employment in the modern economy sectors, while women's traditional

economic contributions have become undervalued (Alsuwaigh, 1989).

Many job opportunities and some spaces of study, like law, have now been opened. While some argue that the changes introduced are insufficient, the social, economic, legal, and even historical factors that create this marginalization have been accumulating over the last few decades and cannot be changed overnight.

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