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Spring 2018 Third Prize Essay

WOMEN IN THE HANDS OF MEN: THE VIOLENCE AND OPPRESSION OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN BETTY SHAMIEH'S *THE BLACK EYED*

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The Black Eyed by Betty Shamieh presents a compelling dialogue of four (deceased) Arab women, all of which are from different time periods, as they interact with each other in heaven about their own trials and tribulations. While in heaven, three women seek the martyr room, in which each woman has her own reason for entry. The fourth woman, Aiesha, who greets the characters in front of the sought-after room of martyrs, was the first female suicide bomber. Delilah looks to reunite with her lover Samson, while Tamam comes in search of her brother who died during the Middle Ages, and the Architect hunts for the man who killed innocent civilians at the World Trade Center, including herself. In detailing each woman's story, Shamieh expounds the hardships, such as violence and oppression, against Muslim women at the hands of their religion and men. Shamieh utilizes an important aspect of plays—a chorus. As the chorus juxtaposes the different time periods from which each woman lived, readers experience a strong narrative about the lives of Muslim women throughout history. I argue that Betty Shamieh's *The Black Eyed* explores the mistreatment of Muslim women as their lives are embattled by oppression and violence, either in the name of love or religion. Ultimately, Shamieh suggests that no matter the era in which Muslim women live, they inevitably face the deeper dynamics of oppression and violence, in which their untimely fate lies at the feet of men in the name of religion.

Shamieh's *The Black Eyed* presents a compelling story of four Muslim women that depicts various levels of abuse, violence, and oppression that each one faced in their respective lifetime. Khyati Joshi, in regard to oppression, states that, “[As oppression] imposes the dominant group's cultural perspective on institutions and individuals, that perspective becomes the societal norm that is written into laws and inscribed on the daily thought patterns of the populace” (Joshi 122). Joshi goes on to suggest that in most cases, religion and culture were “conflated in the minds of the perpetrators” (Joshi 129). Joshi's evidence is relevant to Shamieh's own argument in that, when all forms of violence and oppression become colluded, it seems to become a daily norm for men to mistreat Muslim women. On the other hand, Marie Macey tackles violence amongst women head on, expressing, “It is not only actual violence, but *fear* of violence which constrains and controls women's behavior” (Macey 49). Macey includes sound, yet unfortunate, details about violence, stating, “[service providers] were accused of colluding in women's oppression, as manifested in mental breakdown, depression and suicide as well as disappearances and murders” (Macey 48). Muslim women were also gruelingly being “beaten to death, burned or grievously harmed by their kin” (Macey 48). Rauf and Macey's findings fuse together to form a narrative about how violence and oppression operate and how these injurious actions are hampering Muslim women. In collusion with Rauf's and Macey's findings and Shamieh's own text, readers are able to delve into the lives of Muslim women as they face a myriad of violence and oppression, as well as discovering the importance of the issue at hand. Shamieh's projection of this issue presents itself through the infamous chorus.

Shamieh's utilization of the chorus demonstrates the extensive behavioral commonplace of violence and oppression against Muslim women, ultimately exhibiting the existence of these detrimental forces throughout multiples eras. As Albert Weiner observed, “One hears somewhere along the way that the chorus exists to elevate commonplace details into universal verities” (206). Importantly, the chorus exists to represent a “collective character” (Weiner 206). In consideration of Weiner's suggestions, readers become aware of Shamieh's

incorporation of the chorus as means of voicing what millions of Muslim women have undergone, both past and present. Throughout the play, the chorus engages in dialogue with the main characters, seen when Aisha states, “Waitaminute. I know you’re Arabs but are you Palestinians” (Shamieh 191). The chorus responds, “Yes. We’re here among our own kind. Even in heaven, you breathe more easily with your own people. Here we are and here we have segregated ourselves almost by accident it seems” (Shamieh 191). Their simple interaction demonstrates an intense dynamic with the use of “we” and “with your own people” that transcends beyond just the characters in the play. Shamieh intended to represent the Muslim women of the world and create a narrative of commonality amongst them. Even more, a potent function of the chorus in the play is the completion of the characters’ sentences, and vice versa. As Tamam began, “We know what it means to be weak,” the chorus finished, “to cement a settlement of resentment, brick by brick, in our own ravaged hearts and shell-shocked minds” (Shamieh 202). Shamieh once again engages the chorus as a medium between the characters and the community, suggesting that Muslim women as a whole have been grappled in hardships and, in the eyes of society, faltered under the grip. Specifically, Shamieh touches upon the facets of violence and oppression, with “ravaged hearts” and “shell-shocked minds” strongly implying the consequences of being victims to horror. Ultimately, Shamieh uses the chorus-character interactions as a powerful way of portraying the tribulations Muslim women have gone through, and in featuring these interactions amongst women of different eras, a historical and commonplace chronicle is presented. Shamieh furthers her overall argument with hints of psychological effects women have come to be familiar with.

The brutality of men transcends far beyond physical aspects, crossing into the psychological effects of violence and oppression that Muslim women so commonly have to endure. Often times in society, the psychological mind is a separate essence that tends to be overlooked, despite the equally vast importance in comparison to the other varying signs of violence. Shamieh incorporates this negligence through her characters and their dialogue when the chorus states, “The problems that are most pressing are the ones you tend to ignore” (Shamieh 175). Shamieh manages to generate a narrative about the victimized psyche of a Muslim woman and the way in which society, and Muslim women themselves, repress and avoid these daunting effects of violence. Shamieh furthers her suggestions, as Delilah questions, “What’s the difference between a thing that feels like it kills you and the one that actually does” (Shamieh 179)? In Delilah’s powerful question, Shamieh translates a deep psychological struggle paired with the very being that permits this struggle to evolve: men. As men batter and torture their victims, the Muslim women inevitably become traumatized—their life is changed and their psyche becomes fixated on this trauma. In many ways, this psychological trauma *feels* like it is killing them both psychologically and physically, with men being the root cause. With these women’s sentiments, Shamieh is stressing the tie between men’s violence and the degradation of the Muslim woman’s psyche, where often times, the former necessitates the latter. Shamieh further explores the overall mental effects of violence as she comprises instances of emotional manipulation.

Beyond physical and psychological violence exists the oppression of Muslim women through emotional manipulation. Shamieh, throughout the play, communicates details of both subtle and apparent nods at manipulation, all of which suggested the subsequent result of Muslim women’s oppression. The chorus and Tamam create an interesting dialogue as they voice their ideas of oppression through emotional manipulation, stating, “Oppression is like a coin-maker—you put in human beings, press the right buttons and watch them get squeezed, shrunk, flattened till they take the slim shape of a two-faced coin” (Shamieh 207). Through simile, Shamieh boldly confronts this oppression and the way it operates, indicating that as long as the oppressors—namely men—have the capacity to exploit Muslim women’s “buttons” to their advantage, they can compress them into a futile being, forced to characterize two different selves. These selves would manifest as a version that appeases the oppressor, and the true self that becomes repressed. Emotional manipulation becomes even more evident when, once again, the chorus is positioned with a main character, the Architect, as together they state, “He said he believed in me,

that my work was exceptional. Men lie about such things when it suits them” (Shamieh 224). Shamieh takes a bolder approach to this observation of men, not allowing any sort of mistranslation between what was said and how it would be interpreted. Tamam and the chorus blatantly expose the way men control and oppress Muslim women, often using compliments and flattery to meander themselves into the path of a woman’s desire. With the inclusion of these formidable occurrences, Shamieh supplements her exploration of the deeper dynamics of oppression under which Muslim women become victims. While she exhibits violence and oppression in connection to men, she manages to cover the basis of religion and oppression as well.

Shamieh’s Biblical characters Delilah and Samson and her troubled character Tamam work together in conveying the conceived notion of a Muslim woman’s expected image and position as a counterpart of Islam. Taha Rauf explained the Muslim woman’s role in relation to her community, noting, “The notion that the honour of a community is represented by its women served as an impetus to violate Muslim women’s bodies so as to prevent the extension of honour to successive generations the women could produce” (Rauf 71). Rauf’s consideration of the standard to which Muslim women are held and treated because of this sought-after honor coincides with Shamieh’s own representation of this communal component. Delilah detailed her experience, stating, “Like a snip of the lock from the hair where the power to slaughter my people lay nestled in his whorls... my people called me a whore. He didn’t call me a daughter of an honorable man, or a good woman who loved her people—but a whore” (Shamieh 174). Delilah’s testimony is especially rattling to readers in that despite acting justly for her people, they instead turned against her and berated her. Delilah essentially saved their lives and served as an honorable woman, yet due to their clouded judgment of Muslim women, they instead demeaned her and deemed her as something less than. Interestingly, Delilah observes that her people did not call her a “daughter of an honorable man,” communicating a familiarity that her power and dominance, as well as her fellow Muslim women’s, stems from and is owed to a man. Shamieh furthers this notion of honor and the Muslim woman’s “duty” through Tamam as the character recounts, “And they raped me in front of him, forcing my brother’s eyes open so he had to watch... They not only refer to us as the cockroaches, they examine us, experiment upon us, as if we were that predictable, that much the same, that easy to eradicate” (Shamieh 204-205). Tamam’s body was used as a clear object for community dishonor, in both the rape and principally in her brother being forced to watch. Though her own sexual assault was singular, Tamam still uses “us” so as to represent the same dehumanizing experience men impose upon Muslim women due to their steadfast perceptions. In conjunction with the image of community and honor, Shamieh illuminates the role in which Muslim women are enforced to take on, both as means of power and dishonor. In doing so, readers also witness a linear pattern in the way men perceive these women and subsequently treat them.

Shamieh further explores the violence and oppression enacted on the women through the perspective of male characters, covering both physical and emotional bases. As Rauf explained, “The Muslim identity, superimposed on the physiology of women, constituted the female variant of the threat as an object of the fascination as well as disgust” (Rauf 71). Rauf presents a compelling point in regard to the basis under which many men seem to fall as they carry out their acts of violence—that Muslim women and their bodies are disposable objects, used for their own personal needs. As the chorus expressed, “It comes down to the basics. You knew the only power you had over men was sexual. Those were your means” (Shamieh 174). Shamieh’s interesting use of the word “basics” fashions a realization amongst readers that these sexual means were common amongst the Muslim women community, and a seemingly accepted and fool-proof way of receiving men’s reciprocation. The chorus presents this concept in such a manner that amplifies Shamieh’s idea of commonality in oppression and violence, and that sexual means were something every Muslim woman was inherently familiar with. Even more, Tamam creates an emotional sentiment amongst

readers when she observes, “A birth of a girl is different from a boy. A girl is a gift that’s too precious, a reminder that soft things don’t last in our world” (Shamieh 203). The comparison between newborn boys and girls speaks volumes as it showcases the innate violent nature in which a Muslim girl is born into and subsequently endures. A particular double standard arises at the heart of a birth—one that subtly elucidates the importance of a newborn boy instead of a girl. The aforementioned double standard is reflected through the newborn girl’s birth; that while her existence itself is a gift, her life ultimately follows a notably vicious and divergent path than that of the newborn boy. Shamieh’s incorporation of this declaration and double standard deems itself as another aspect in which men manipulate and use Muslim women and their bodies, drawing them out of their embodiment of “soft things” and instead inflicting ruggedness. Essentially, in focusing on men’s perspective of Muslim women, readers come to a particular awareness of how these perceptions become a reality for women, and ultimately, their demise.

Betty Shamieh’s *The Black Eyed* addresses a longstanding issue in the community of Muslim women, which entails violence and oppression developing as a constant presence in their lives. Through violence and oppression, a historical and present-day narrative of commonality manifests itself as psychological abuse, emotional manipulation, violence and oppression due in part to the perception of women in Islam, and men’s own perception of these women. Shamieh’s powerful play comes to an even more potent end as Aiesha, Tamam, and Delilah come together in a chant of revolution, signifying the past generational struggle, yet shaping an important discussion for the future generations of Muslim women. With this strong closing—and the play as a whole—Shamieh creates a precise discourse about the past, present, and future for Muslim women. Violence and oppression had, almost innately, become an aspect twirled into Muslim women’s lives, with men and religion consistently acting as a brute force for these components. Fundamentally, in one way or another, Muslim women became victims of their own reality.

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