

Dynamics of Sexual Victimization: A Monolithic Portrayal of the Male Character in Sara Shaarawi's *Niqabi Ninja*

Abstract

Feminists view sexual violence and harassment as an exhibition of men's patriarchal control over the female sexuality. Sexual harassment of females by the male gender is particularly considered an important aspect of women oppression as it reduces women to the status of an object, purposely structured to satisfy men's sexual craving. Sara Shaarawi's *Niqabi Ninja* delineates the Niqab (face veil) and other forms of Islamic dress code for women as integral part of the Islamic injunction that symbolises modesty and physical rectitude. Unfortunately, such dress pattern does not preclude women from being susceptible to sexual abuse. This paper, therefore, examines the portrayal of the male character in relation to the treatment of Muslim women's sexuality, especially the reduction of women to sexual objects for men's gratification. Shaarawi's *Niqabi Ninja* is purposively selected owing to the paucity of research on it, especially with regards to its exploration of the sexual ordeals of veiled Muslim women in Egypt. The paper adopts radical feminism as its theoretical frame, and employs content analysis approach. It concludes that the depiction of sexual harassment of the female gender in Shaarawi's *Niqabi Ninja* spurs the monolithic portrayal of men as sexual beasts. Thus, a more balanced portraiture of the male gender may be more appropriate as it ensures that female writers are not guilty of the charge that have been laid against male writers.

Keywords: portrayal, patriarchy, oppression, female body, sexual harassment

Introduction

Sexual harassment can be regarded as a range of actions characterised by making improper sexual remarks or physical advances towards the opposite sex. It can also be viewed as

the unpleasant request(s) for sexual favours from the other sex. Sexual harassment subsists when one's behaviour is sufficiently severe or persuasive as to create an intimidating, hostile or repugnant environment. Such behaviour often persists despite objections from the person to whom the conduct is directed (Sexual Assault, Prevention and Awareness Center, University of Michigan). As a form of violence, sexual victimisation is a "mechanism through which social constructions of masculinity are produced and reproduced" (Fahlberg and Pepper 673). In so doing, the objectification of female sexuality becomes a means of exhibiting phallic power in gender relation.

Sexual victimisation of the female gender by the male gender is viewed by feminist critics as an important aspect of women oppression due to its degradation of the woman to the status of an object, purposely structured to satisfy men's sexual desire. Sexual harassment is one of the potent patriarchal oppressive weapons that deny the female gender autonomy and dignity as it is constructed as integral to the socio-historic subordination of women in patriarchal societies. Fahlberg and Pepper's assertion is apposite in this regard:

Feminist scholars argued that men and women operated within a patriarchal system wherein men employed various tactics to maintain their privileged status over women ...sexual violence was viewed as one strategy for men to assert power and control over women (678).

Sexual victimisation, therefore, brings to the fore the erroneous assumption of men that the female gender is always available, less privileged, and highly vulnerable; and, as such, she can readily be taken advantage of to douse their inordinate sexual craving. Unfortunately, women who are often victims of sexual harassment are usually traumatised, at times, beyond redemption. Consequently, African feminists disavow the patriarchal conception of women as sex objects and decry "cultural anomalies, such as rape, intimidation and subjugation of

vulnerable female subjectivities” (Uwah 205). Thus, feminism prioritises gender issues with a special focus on women than men because, while women are the sufferers of societal ills, men are the usual suspects and perpetrators of such crimes. This fact is evident in Sara Sharaawi’s *Niqabi Ninja*, which has been purposively selected for this study given that research on it is scarce, especially with regards to its exploration of the sexual ordeals of veiled Muslim women in Egypt. The paper will, among other things, examine shades of sexual victimisation that the female gender experiences at every stage of life using a content analysis approach. Radical feminism has been adopted as the theoretical framework for the study.

Theoretical framework

Radical feminism is adopted as the theoretical frame for this paper due to its alignment with the radical temper that Sharaawi’s *Niqabi Ninja* embodies. Feminist movement had its history dated back into the nineteenth century (Dobie 103), with its basic concerns being the advancement of women’s rights, issues and interest, as well as the eradication and nullification of all forms of sexual oppression (Echols, Lerner, Kempwirth, qtd in Akorede 24). As a theory, feminism essentially focuses on the analysis of women’s experiences, aspirations and emancipation agenda owing to the reality of the various forms of patriarchal oppressions that women are subjected to in society. It underscores germane issues like sexual objectification, violence, oppression, sex stereotyping, discrimination, and patriarchy (Akorede 20), with a view to changing them and ensuring that women are given equal rights and opportunities as men. Green and Kahn particularly draw attention to how feminist’s scholarship “serves to combat multifaceted shades of female oppression in patriarchy and restore a female socio-political and

economic empowerment by extending knowledge about women's experience and contribution to development of the society" (1-2).

However, modern attempts at examining "literature through a feminist lens began to develop only in the early 1960s" (Dobie 103). As a literary criticism, feminism examines the delineation of the female character and her experiences in literary texts. It sees literature as a "socio-political weapon for building up women's consciousness", initiating "a woman-centered analysis of texts where the image of the woman in literary texts is critically assessed to highlight the oppression and abuse of women characters" (Akorede 36). In combating the multi-layered oppressions of women in fictional experiences, therefore, feminism translates to a number of shades of related female-oriented criticism. Discussing the several waves and strands of feminism, Mabel Ekwierhoma posits:

The new feminism consists of several linked movements: radical feminism, which sees men's oppression of women as a central historical event; bourgeois feminism, which seeks to eliminate sexual discrimination and sex roles; cultural feminism, which hopes to embody a special, enhancing female sensibility; Marxist feminism, which integrates economic and social class and feminist analysis; black feminism which organizes the woman to often act out; lesbian feminism, which finds central bonds between women. However, they all share a special balancing of politics and culture (41).

Radical feminism, in particular, is women-centred as it is based on women's experiences, perceptions and interests, with a special focus on the roots of women's oppression (Bryson 181; Rowland and Klein 9-10). Bryson gives an insight into the theoretical framework that distinguishes it from other strands of feminism, noting:

there is a clear theoretical starting-point which distinguishes it from other approaches and provides a unifying framework within which diverging ideas have been developed. In the first place, it is essentially a theory of, by and for women; as such, it

is based firmly in women's own experiences and perceptions.... Secondly, it sees the oppression of women as the most fundamental and universal form of domination, and its aim is to understand and end this... thirdly... radical feminist analysis insists that male power is not confined to the public worlds of politics and paid employment, but that it extends into private life; this means that traditional concepts of power and politics are challenged and extended to such 'personal' areas of life as the family and sexuality, both of which are seen as instruments of patriarchal domination (181).

Radical feminism sees all women as part of an oppressed and marginalised group, “stressing that no woman can walk down the street or even live in her home safely without fear of violation by men’ (Rowland and Klein 10). Radical feminism, therefore, primarily focuses on women’s subordination, emphasising how male’s hegemony is exercised and reinforced through practices like childbearing, pornography, marriage, sexual harassment, rape, and prostitution, among others. Patriarchy is identified in this regard as the oppressing structure of male domination; hence, the advocacy for a total revolution of the social structure aimed at eliminating patriarchal processes and forcefully demanding women’s rights to “human space of existence” (Akorede 39; Rowland and Klein 12).

Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* similarly harps on the feminist notion of patriarchy, maintaining that male dominance is politically and institutionally established to subordinate women (Millett 23). Of particular interest is the sexual objectification and abuse of women as a way of controlling women’s sexuality in society given that patriarchy places men at an advantaged position over women. She further notes how the operational patriarchal force in most societies “relies on a form of violence, particularly sexual in character and realized most completely in the act of rape... In rape (and other sexual abuse) the emotions of aggression, hatred, contempt, and the desire to break or violate personality, take a form consummately

appropriate to sexual politics” (Millett 44). Abrams and Harpham, in their contribution, maintain that in patriarchal institution, men “aggrandize their aggressive phallic selves and degrade women as submissive sexual objects” (121).

Thus, radical feminists see sexual oppression in its varied manifestations as a fundamental form of patriarchal oppression; they, in fact, take women’s experiences of sexual violation seriously and avow that the perpetrators, who are men, should be held responsible. Identified important figures whose writings and activism have significantly shaped the sensibility and general temper of radical feminism include Simon de Beauvoir, Hedwig Dohm, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joslyn Gage, Charlotte Perkins, Christabel Pankhurst, Virginia Woolf, Mary Daly, Shulamith Firestone, Ti-Grace Atkinson, Gail Chester, Charlotte Bunch, Kate Millett, Germaine Greer, and Nikki Gemmed.

It is, therefore, against the backdrop of the various issues raised in radical feminism that this paper examines Shaarawi’s *Niqabi Ninja* using Elaine Showalter’s second mode of feminist criticism, with a view to foregrounding sexual ordeals that women are subjected to and the actions taken by the central female character to end patriarchal hegemony that has reduced them to sexual items.

Synopsis of Sara Shaarawi’s *Niqabi Ninja*

Shaarawi’s *Niqabi Ninja* is a play set in Cairo, Egypt, during the chaotic period of the Egyptian uprising. The play acknowledges the sexual victimisation of veiled Muslim women through its two female characters who explore the range and complexity of sexual harassments against the women folk within the patriarchal Arab society. *Niqabi Ninja* narrates the story of Hana, a woman who lives in Cairo, and her alter ego- a super hero conscience who wears a

Niqab. Hana has endured myriads of sexual harassment for most of her life, right from age twelve when she buys her first brassier with her mother in a shop in Cairo, to the time she experiences the mob rapes at the Tahrir square. These progressive sexual actions, particularly the rape and other unimaginable mass sexual assaults, make Hana blame her colourful attires as well as her femininity for the incessant harassments she suffers. She, thus, devices a set of rules to avert the numerous sexual ordeals awaiting her on the streets of modern-day Cairo. However, all her efforts prove abortive, forcing her to take decisive measures to forestall a future recurrence. In particular, she resorts to the adoption of an alter-ego, a super hero – Niqabi Ninja, who has a record of injuries done to Hana, and is poised to avenging all forms of sexual harassment.

Niqab Ninja: A Juxtaposition of Defensive and Offensive Clothing

A Niqab (or Niqaab) is a clothing item that covers the face, worn by some Muslim women as an aspect of hijab. Hijab is the traditional covering of the hair and other parts of the body by Islam female adherents. Hijab as an Arabic word means barrier, and can be translated as a veil curtain or cover. In its broader sense, it signifies the principle of modesty in attitude and dressing for Muslim women. Although the most perceptible form of hijab is the head covering, the combination of a head covering and a veil that covers all of a woman's face except her eyes, is regarded as Niqab. Hence, a Muslim woman that wears a face-veil is often referred to as a niqabi.

The Niqab and other forms of Islamic dress code for the female gender are considered an integral part of Islamic injunction that symbolises modesty and physical rectitude. Besides, they distinguish Muslim women from non-Muslims. However, despite the fact that a niqabi is fully covered up, she is still prone to sexual harassment, especially in public spaces. Mason-Bish and

Zempi opine that “the niqab symbolizes the sexual ‘non-availability’ of Muslim woman... the visibility of the niqab confounds public norms” (13). Hence, the menfolk sometimes find it difficult to overlook females like the niqabis who “disrupt” the “pattern of the masculine gaze” (Franks 13). In essence, the sexual harassment of veiled Muslim women has its springboard in men’s curiosity of the female body covered up with the hijab or niqab. Mason-Bish and Zempi, thus, aver ‘the visibility of the niqab renders Muslim women the “ideal” target for street harassment; wearing the niqab marks Muslims women readily visible as “soft”, “easy”, and “convenient” targets to attack’ (5).

Shaarawi’s *Niqabi Ninja* paints a dark picture of the incessant street harassments that the female gender is subjected to in Egypt. Set in Cairo during the 2011 political uprisings popularly known as Arab Spring, the play catalogues the malicious sexual abuses that Hana suffers at every developmental stage, right from her puberty at twelve. Hana is a microcosm of Egyptian women, and, by extension, women all over the world who are susceptible to or are victims of sexual harassments orchestrated by the male gender. Shaarawi clearly states this in her introductory note to the play, “Hana doesn’t represent me, but she is dedicated to every single woman I grew up with, every single woman who shared a story or called me in tears, every woman to whom I turned, every woman at those demonstrations, every woman who spoke out and every woman who didn’t” (9).

The dramatic dialogue between Hana and her imaginary superhero foregrounds the multifaceted street harassments she suffers while growing up in Cairo. Her first nasty sexual encounter happens when she goes out with her mother to buy her first brassier and some men keep raining verbal assaults with derogatory expressions like “I like what you’re wearing”, and “Don’t you wanna show me what you just bought?” (16). Hana learns moving fast and ignoring

men as the first rule to avoiding street harassment. At thirteen, Hana is intersected by a group of boys who ask for her mobile phone number, with one of them following her for twenty minutes. Between ages fourteen and eighteen, Hana faces harassments from street vendors (on her way back from school), boys on her street, and even a police officer who shamelessly comments on her white T- shirt “those tits are begging for a good titty fuck” (18). She consequently decides to do away with colourful dress: “She never wore white again...or yellow, or red, or blue, or any colour” (18), hoping wearing only black dress would save her from further sexual harassment. However, her dark clothing merely heightens different seductive gestures from all kinds of men:

Hana: Eyes. Eyes everywhere. Big round eyes, small equity eyes, almond shaped eyes, lazy eyes, brown eyes, black eyes, hazel eyes, green eyes...
Niqabi Ninja: They’re eating me alive with their eyes.
Hana: They are penetrating her skin.
Niqabi Ninja: Without even touching me.
Hana: The clothes don’t matter (19).

Thus, Hana no longer blames her clothes but her body for the “normalised” sexual harassment she suffers: “Do you know what it feels like to be so ashamed of your own body... of that soft flesh under all those layers of clothes?” (27). Ordinarily, wearing the niqab should offer protection against sexual predators, but the reverse is the case as Muslim women are sexualised, reduced to their bodies. Given that the refusal of veiled Muslim women to conform to the dress code that provides “the object of the gaze” constitutes a disruption of men’s expectation in public sphere, the bodies of veiled Muslim women become a medium for the inscription of hostility or enactment of sexual pleasure (Perry 16). Hana’s sexual victimisation as a female student in Cairo is apt here as she experiences series of sexual abuses and harassments in public, buttressing Laniya’s definition of street harassment as “the unsolicited verbal and/or nonverbal act of a male stranger towards a female, solely on the basis of her sex, in a public place” (100).

Hana's sexual harassment reaches its climax with the events at the rally in Tahrir square, famed as the epicentre of incredulous sexual ravishments in Egypt, in addition to being the centre of the Egyptian uprising. Importantly, Tahrir square is regarded as the circle of hell in *Niqabi Ninja* as it witnesses a number of mob rapes; in fact, men in Tahir square molest and rape a woman at the place in the square called 'centre of hell'. Hana paints a vivid picture of the loathsome processes involved:

First, they separate a girl from the people she's with...they crowd around her, they're usually around fifty or sixty men. And they form three circles... The innermost of circle are the ones with their hands on the girl. They grab her, keep her in the middle, and form a tight circle around her. They undress her, and using just their hands, they rape her (35).

This ubiquitous sexual scourge is documented by Kamal who explains the socio-political incidences surrounding the notorious and violence-ridden Tahrir Square:

The earliest sexually violent targeting of women activists goes back to the anti-Mubarak demonstration on 25 May 2005, when, for the first time, women protesters were sexually attacked in public by men in civilian clothes standing next to the police. They were part of the civilian clothed thugs who have been regularly accompanying the police in the last decade, known among the protesters as 'the karate squads'. On that day in May, and for the first time, the demonstrators came face-to-face with an obviously new batch of police-supported thugs: the sexual harassment squad. This developed during the 2011 Revolution and onwards into organized squads, as well as sexual violence and gang rape groups targeting women activists and journalists during demonstrations. This direct targeting of women was not only restricted to women participants in political protests. Throughout the past decade, there has been a growing phenomenon of sexual harassment, violence and rape incidents during national holidays at crowded recreational city centre spots, such as in public parks and at cinemas (15).

Importantly, Shaarawi universalises the objectification of women through sexual harassment by revealing how Hana's drink is drugged by a man when she visits a London club,

so that she can be sexually abused. Reacting to the awful experience, Niqabi Ninja, asserts that sexual exploitation of women is the same globally:

Hana: It's not the same in London.

Niqabi Ninja: It's the same thing.

Hana: No, it's not. They were drunk. People do stupid things when they're drunk.

Niqabi Ninja: Like wait until a woman is unconscious before raping her... tell me Hana, do western hands feel any different?

Hana: I need there to be hope. There needs to be an escape. Maybe one day I can be somewhere else. I won't have to worry about my clothes and my skin and ...

Niqabi Ninja: You'll still be worried. The rules might be different but they're still there. They will need a lot of convincing to believe that you don't want to fuck them (24-26).

Male gender sexual rapaciousness is a common trend in most patriarchates as sexual freedom is considered a patriarchal dividend. Regrettably, sexual harassment advances power imbalance between the two genders as the male gender controls the public spheres, relegating the female gender to the private spheres. It, in fact, 'excludes women by demarcating the street as "male space" which maintains and perpetuates the public/private distinction in a gendered form' (Davis 21). Cairo and London, the fictional settings of *Niqabi Ninja*, therefore, constitute hostile environments, implicitly instructing the woman that she is not 'welcome' to the public places, as long as her body is not available to male gaze. Men, therefore, "genderize the street by institutionalising male privilege in, and ownership of the public street, there by excluding women" (Davis 63). As evident in this instance, Hana's methods of quenching the embers of street harassment as a resident in Cairo fail, until she adopts an alter-ego, a niqabi equipped with the Japanese art of ninjutsu to punish predators that feed on the dignity of women.

Although the niqab is a modest clothing worn by traditional Muslim women to avoid unwarranted sexual attraction to men in public, it never discourages sexual perverts. Hence, Hana manipulates the niqab, turning it into a niqabi that acts as a ninja, a niqabi ninja, who goes

out, armed with weapons, to seek revenge on men who have abandoned themselves to debauchery in Cairo:

Every night I will hunt one of you down. Every night I will walk through the streets. I will take a mental picture of every piece of shit who dares to comment my clothes, my breasts, my ass, my eyes, my mouth, my legs, my cunt. And I will choose just one of you lucky bastards. Tonight, I've made my choice. And this is just the beginning. A warning to the streets of Cairo. (47).

Hana's first victim's offence is that "... he'd like to have his way with her ass one day" (45). Hana, therefore, hunts him down:

Hana: Our heroine hunts him down, and knocks him out unconscious. She ties him to a table, she tattoos the world's filthy pervert. Then she tattoos his specific crime: Touch, filthy comments, Harassment, Rape, Mob rape ... right in the middle of his face, for everyone to see (46- 47).

This singular act places Hana in the class of the "the militant Muslim woman" who are in hijab with "a gun and military clothes" (Bullock and Jafri 36). Thus, the niqabi, which within the Islamic precepts is a covering intended to defend and protect the women from unwarranted sexual assaults from the male gender, becomes an offensive weapon, fashioned to inflict injury on the male gender. This reversal is a deliberate artistic machination of the playwright to invert the place of the niqab in gender relations, in the public spheres of Cairo. The aggressive masculine trait of the man is inverted as he becomes a prey to be hunted down by the predator, a Niqabi Ninja, who has shed her feminine traits for violent behaviours occasioned by the malicious sexual violation of Egyptian women.

The Male Gender in *Niqabi Ninja*: A Monolithic Portrayal

One important concern of feminist criticism is the evaluation of the depiction of the female gender in literature with the aim of correcting stereotypical roles often assigned to women in men's literary canon. However, in a desperate effort at correcting skewed characterizations of women in male writings, it is not uncommon to find female writers overturning the male gender, giving way to distorted portrayals of the male gender. This fact is evident in *Niqabi Ninja* as it projects a monolithic portraiture of the male gender. For instance, all the men Hana had contact with directly or indirectly are termed sexual perverts with medals of unbridled sexual appetite. These men delineated as "satyromaniacs" and "philanderers", "bastard, son of a bitch, fucking piece of shit, and fifty pervert" (31,41), are never deterred by their ethnic affiliation, age, educational background, and profession:

Nqabi Ninja: Taxi drivers are fuckers. Bus drivers are fuckers. People riding the bus are fuckers. Most men in the street are fuckers. Most men you encounter in the world are fuckers. Most women also fuckers. Street vendors are fucker. High school students are fuckers. School children are fuckers. Teachers are fuckers. University professors are fuckers. The unemployed are fuckers. Your work colleagues are fuckers. Members of your own family are fuckers. Revolutionaries are fuckers. Religious people are fuckers. The military are all fuckers. All politicians are the biggest fuckers. Police men are massive fuckers... and everyone in Egypt is either fucked over or fucked up. (23).

Shaarawi, therefore, presents Egyptian men as sex maniacs that can only be satisfied by unrestrained harassment of women in the public sphere, even when the women are all covered up as niqabis and go out in the company of a man. Indeed, Mason-Bash and Zempi have pointed out that the fact that women "go with a male companion not only makes them reliant on men but also does not always mean that they will not face abuse" (28). This reality dawns on Hana as she and another lady are sexually molested when she goes on a rescue mission to Tahrir Square in

company of Omar, a male friend. Hana paints a sickening picture of herself and the lady being assaulted in this manner:

Hana: A man clutching her long curly hair. Another is pulling at her veil which is caught around her throat... I can tell that her top has been ripped off. They pull and thrash her across the ground. With one final scream she disappears into the crowd.... They break me away from Omar.... They have me now.... I am pushed to the ground.... I feel several bodies on top of me... trying to penetrate all the layer I have on.... Fingers everywhere. In between my thighs. In my unbuttoned trousers.... Someone is pulling my bra straps (41-42).

Needless to add that all men in Cairo, irrespective of their religious leaning, are labeled as perpetrators of this heinous sexual crime in public domain. In fact, Christians and Westernised or non-conformist Muslim men are often accused of sexual harassment as they not only see veiled women as deviants of Western values, but are also disappointed that the veiled female body is not available for public gaze, domination and unrestrained harassment, which would have ensured men's dominance in both private and public spheres.

Undoubtedly, Shaarawi's preoccupation in *Niqabi Ninja* is to showcase the myriads of oppressions that the female body is subjected to in the hands of depraved and brutish Egyptian men. Hana's ordeals, in this regard, beam a searchlight on the prevalence of sexual victimisation in Egypt, especially in early 20th century. She and her unconscious superhero similarly present staggering statistics on sexual harassment in Egypt:

Niqabi Ninja: According to a report published by UN women in 2003, 99.3 percent of women in Egypt have been sexually harassed in some form or another.

Hana: Article . A girl drops to the ground, men park a car on top of her hair so she can't move.

Hana: Testimony hundreds and hundreds of hands everywhere. Stripping and violating my body. Fingers penetrating me everywhere.

Niqabi Ninja: The reality is 100 percent of women in Egypt have experienced sexual harassment in some form or another (36-37).

Although one cannot shy away from the verisimilitude of experiences of the women in Egypt as portrayed in this play, character delineation involving a stereotypical portrayal of a particular gender seems a deliberate presentation of a monolithic view of the gender. In this regard, Shaarawi seems to have advertently depicted scenarios that basically categorise all men in Egypt as sexually perverts; hence, the need to ruthlessly root them out. Clearly, the skewed portraiture of the male gender marks *Niqabi Ninja* as a feminist literature, which 'is a work written in a prejudiced way to favour the status of women... a ... castigation of the male... in protest against the previously damaging female portrayal in many male writings'(Sotunsa7), perhaps to "... justify the radical steps being taken by them to end their oppression, or better still ... mete out to men whatever injustice(s)... done to women for centuries past..." (Edebor 51).

Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the portrayal of the male gender in relation to the treatment of women's sexuality, particularly the reduction of women to sexual objects for men's gratification. Using radical feminism as the theoretical frame and adopting a content analysis approach, Sara Shaarawi's *Niqabi* has been incisively interrogated to unearth layers of sexual assault that women are subjected to in the hands of men as evident in Cairo, Egypt. Such sexual molestations manifest in forms of street harassment, unsavoury sexual remarks and incessant rapes of women by men. The paper posits that wearing Niqab (face veil) does not preclude women from being susceptible to sexual abuse which often leaves them traumatic for the rest of their lives. It, nevertheless, concludes that the depiction of sexual harassment of the female

gender in Shaarawi's *Niqabi Ninja* spurs the monolithic portrayal of men as sexual beasts. Thus, a more balanced portraiture of the male gender may be more appropriate as it ensures that female writers are not guilty of the charge that have been laid against male writers due to skewed and stereotypical depictions of females in their writings.

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