European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies, 14 (1),23-38, 2026
Print ISSN: 2055-0138(Print)
Online ISSN: 2055-0146(Online)
Website: https://www.eajournals.org/
Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

Feminist Structures in Barbara Wood's Novel *Virgins of Paradise*

Farouq Rezq Bekhit Sayyid[1,2]
[1]Assistant Professor of English Language and Literature
College of Arts, Jouf University, Saudi Arabia
[2]Lecturer in English Literature. Faculty of Languages and Translation, Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt
Email: frsayyid@ju.edu.sa
Correspondence: Dr. Farouq Rezq Bekhit Sayyid, Department of English, College of Arts, Jouf University, KSA, Tel: +996566811343, Email: frsayyid@ju.edu.sa

doi: https://doi.org/10.37745/ejells.2013/vol14n12338 Published January 31, 2026

Citation: Sayyid F.R.B. (2026) Feminist Structures in Barbara Wood's Novel Virgins of Paradise, *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, 14 (1),23-38

ABSTRACT: *The present paper offers a critical feminist reading of the American novelist Barbara Wood's bestselling novel Virgins of Paradise (1993). It aims at analyzing Wood's novel in light of feminist criticism demonstrated particularly in works by Chandra Mohanty, Fatima Mernissi, and Daphne Grace and their theory of patriarchy. The analysis of this novel motivates one to infer how patriarchy is engineered by the male to subdue and decentralize the female by treating the latter as if she were a sexed being, or rather the inessential other. In order to achieve this objective, Wood sets up a narrative vision in terms of which she portrays how patriarchs marginalize and subordinate women. Hence, the very objective of the paper is to argue that the subordination of women is the leitmotif in Wood's Virgin of Paradise. In order to depict such a dominant motif, i.e., how women suffer from patriarchal segregation, Wood composes a feminist vision that brings into prominence the power-structured relationships designed by the male to create an imbalance of power that subordinates the female. This paper is also meant to explore the reasons behind the birth of patriarchy as well as motivating women to stand against patriarchal programming, which seems to have marginalized women since the beginning of human history. Such is the patriarchal agenda which has driven Wood to point out how patriarchy does not only minimize the status of women, but also instill into culture that they are not humans.*

KEYWORDS*:* Barbara wood, feminism, patriarchy, culture, religion, orientalism.

INTRODUCTION

Barbara Wood (b.1947) is an American international bestselling author of about thirty acclaimed novels. According to the encyclopedia of *Contemporary Authors*, Wood was a surgical technician

when she "quit her job in 1977 to become a novelist" (439). Wood's often epic length novels, which range from mystery romances to historical thrillers, frequently "showcase her medical background, and their exotic locales reflect her love of travel" (439). In many of her narratives, Wood takes readers to exotic locales and provides them with a fresh perspective into world cultures, and an in-depth research precedes all of her titles. The reader, thus, can expect an epic historical tale filled with compelling characters. Wood, as Rachel Kumer notes, "combines overtly disparate elements, and produces a hybrid of the genre that incorporates romance, mystery, cultural diversity, gender struggle and even the esoteric" (727).

Lisa Kendall reveals that *Virgins of Paradise* draws upon Wood's "lifelong interest in Egypt". While engaged in her research in Egypt, she "stayed with friends who introduced her to a variety of "typical" Egyptians ranging from "Westernized women in cat suits and spiked heels to women who wouldn't even come out of the kitchen to talk" (77). It should be noted, however, that the title of Wood's historical saga bears the name of the street in which the novel is set and has nothing to do with the "virgins of paradise" as they are recognized in Islamic thought and literature. In this work, Wood takes her readers back to 1945, to Egypt at the close of WW II and to a powerful family from the highest circles of nobility, the Rasheed family. Meanwhile, she does not gloss over the political corruption, unfair laws, society's blind ignorance, the grasping dominance of men, and the restricting traditions and customs which were controlling Egypt at that time. A multi-generational saga layered with historical events, the narrative incorporates details of strong women characters and family curses. It examines the lives of two half-sisters, Yasmina and Camelia, and their struggle to gain independence within the powerful Rasheed family.

Wood divides *Virgins of Paradise* into seven parts, in which each represents a significant slice of time in modern Egyptian history, and relates how the Rasheed family fared through the social and political upheaval that overwhelmed Egypt in the twentieth century. The baseline is 1945 when, at the end of WW II, the British occupation disintegrates and the royal aristocrats reign, but there are portents of change. Part II, begins on 'Black Saturday,' January 23, 1952, when rebels destroy mostly British interests in Cairo and continues through July of that year and the exile of King Farouk, which precipitates upsets and tragedy for the Rasheeds. In Part III, set in 1962, we see how the Rasheeds coping with the sociological changes under Nasser's regime. For Part IV, the plot continues with the intricacies, secrets and crises of the Rasheed clan in 1966/1967 up to the eve of the Six-Day war and the death of Nasser in 1970. Part V picks up the epic in 1973 after Sadat had made some changes. Here, the story shifts in part to Southern California where Jasmine [henceforth Yasmina], born in Part One and disowned in Part Four, is studying medicine. In Part VI, the story tracks both the Rasheeds in Egypt and the outcast Yasmina in 1980 and into 1981, when Mubarak assumes control after the assassination of Sadat. The plot gets sticky as the swirl of lives begins to converge and clash in Part VII, in 1988. The epilogue, sometime in the early nineties, picks up where the prologue left the reader wondering. A wealth of fascinating historical detail is woven into the mix, but it is Wood's characters who bring each era vividly to life.

European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies, 14 (1),23-38, 2026
Print ISSN: 2055-0138(Print)
Online ISSN: 2055-0146(Online)
Website: https://www.eajournals.org/
Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

DISCUSSION

Virgins of Paradise, an engaging work of historical fiction, provides an in-depth view of the very complex paradigm of patriarchy in masculinity-based societies of the Middle East, in which women are both victims and conspirators in the perpetuation of a system that fails to uphold the inalienable rights of women. The novel, which is intelligently told against a backdrop of Egyptian politics with a feminist theme focusing on the oppression of women in a male-dominated society, functions as a critique of the Egyptian culture as well as a record of the social and moral changes that have taken place in Egypt in the wake of World War II up to the 1980s.

In *Virgins of Paradise,* Wood starts her feminist approach through the debates on women's "veiling" and "domestic seclusion", taking them as literary vehicles through which she can elaborate on the patriarchal discourse in the Egyptian context. Believing that Egypt is a conservative society that maintains some of the more rigid patriarchal and misogynistic cultural elements that have been reformed in similar countries, Wood describes Egypt as "one of the most oppressed societies in the world, when it comes to women" (319)[1]. She explores this symbolic and actual confinement of the female figure and depicts some of her female characters as resisting, challenging and breaking free from these confines. Besides, she calls for all Egyptian women to "get with the times and accept the fact that men and women are equal" (376).

Clearly, Wood is critical of the Islamic laws which command women to "dress modestly and act modestly because it is so written in the Koran [Qur'ān]", but allow men "to dress and act any way they desired" (227). To support her argumentation, Wood cites the Qur'ānic text commanding men and women to lower their gaze and be modest (228). The assumption here is that as long as both men and women are commanded to lower their gaze, then they should be treated equally in terms of dressing and any related issues. Wood recounts how Amira, who abides by tradition and rules of moral conduct, always makes sure that her girls leave the house modestly dressed, which means "long sleeves, hems below the knees, and collars that buttoned up to the neck". This is in addition to the scarf to hide their hair which she considers a "temptation to men" (210).

In Amira's ideology, the purpose of "veiling" is to avoid exposing unstable, vulnerable females to male lusts, which she describes as constantly raging and relatively uncontrollable. Nefissa tells Alice, her British sister-in-law, how her mother "thinks the streets of Cairo are filled with lusts and temptations and men lurking at every corner to rob a girl of her honor" (76). Seemingly, Amira believes that women are presumed to be highly emotional and irrational and to lack the strength of character necessary to resist seductive overtures or to preserve their chastity. Because men cannot help themselves, women must be at fault, if sexually assaulted, for being in proximity with strange males or being attired in a manner that provokes their sexual imagination.

Arguably, Wood absolutely rejects any notion of the veil's utility for protecting women. Instead, she assumes that unveiled women can be more virtuous and successful than the "veiled' ones. She

exemplifies how the unveiled Dahiba, Ibrahim's outcast sister, had "not been linked to a single scandal" or even a "hint of romance" (299), despite her arresting beauty. In this way, this code of dress, according to Kadiatu Kanneh, "becomes interchangeable with tradition and essentialism", and "the female body enters an unstable arena of scrutiny and meaning" (347). Thus, when Alice, Ibrahim's English wife, sees her six-year-old daughter Yasmina "wrapped in the black veil", she experiences a fear she had never felt before. She reflected on "how her little daughter's future would be like, and how would she be treated, and what chances would she have in this [Egyptian] culture…" (123).

These concerns illustrate how gender and dress are utilized, by Wood and similar feminists, as instruments of demarcation between the Arab and Western worlds. Miriam Cooke argues how Muslim women's physical appearance "becomes a crucial element in the observer's interpretation of whether the cohesiveness of the international Islamic community is a good or a bad thing" (131). Cooke further assumes that the veil "symbolizes a belonging to a religious community that is patriarchal and powerful". The "veiled" women, therefore, "highlight the sexually conservative character of the modern community in which women live and function", and the veil "marks a woman as religiously observant, and as someone whose honor men are obliged to safeguard" (132-133). Hence, the "appearance" of the young Yasmina demonstrates how idealized images and real bodies of women serve as national boundaries. This western liberal feminist stance speaks of Wood's inherent desire to create a literary space where she negotiates her ideals of femininity. As Daphne Grace puts it, "the image of the veiled woman is not always "neutral", but is seen as "an ambivalent and shifting signifier, redolent with 'Orientalist import'" (1).

Wood sets out to reinforce the argument that 'veiled' women are muted personas with no identities of their own. Covered by the veil, women seem weak, submissive, and entirely controlled by their male counterparts. Describing the veil as a "symbol of repression and slavery" (122), the author speaks of how the Rasheeds could not recall having seen Amira in anything "but black" (477) and how she holds her veil "to her face so that only her eyes showed" (39). Here, Wood assumes that women's "veiling" is allowed to accentuate a woman's physical figure. She questions the female's level of power and expression while shrouded in this garment. However, Fatima Mernissi, herself a radical feminist, entirely disagrees with Wood's approach in tackling Eastern feminism that way. Mernissi exemplifies the sexual inequality in Western culture which, according to her, is based "on the belief in women's biological inferiority". This, Mernissi proceeds, "explains some aspects of Western women's movements, such as that they are almost always led by women, that their effect is often very superficial, and that they have not yet succeeded in significantly changing the male-female dynamics in that culture". On the contrary, the whole system in Eastern feminism is "based on the assumption that women are powerful and dangerous beings". In this way, all sexual institutions, such as sexual segregation, "can be taken or perceived as a strategy for containing [women's] power" (19). This belief in women's power, as Mernissi assumes, is likely to give the evolution of the relationship between men and women in Muslim settings a pattern entirely different from the Western one.

In particular, the question of women's "veiling" remains one of the most controversial issues in postcolonial and feminist studies. This is in addition to the fact that "veiling" has also taken center stage as a symbol of oppression and subjugation in both academic studies and the popular literature. In cultural studies, moreover, the question of "veiling" has been thrust into the forefront of arguments surrounding identity, colonialism and patriarchy. Lindsey Moore points out how women's "veiling" is "identified as the marker of cultural difference constructed on a global level" (138). Ironically, however, Daphne Grace reveals how Western women were considered "civilized" during the Victorian Age because they "covered up", and the exposure was deemed "uncivilized". Now, the "covered veiled woman" has replaced the exposed woman as the signifier of the 'other', indicating Western woman's superiority" (56-57).

Wood, however, reveals contradictory and paradoxical situations throughout the novel. While decrying the "veil" as a wall that materially and spiritually deters women from building their own identities, Wood states how "veiling" of the Rasheed women is not merely related to Amira's "strict rules", but also has nothing to do with Islamic norms or patriarchy. This is evidenced by her discourse on the "progressive" Ali Rasheed "who had given his wife the permission to go about the city whenever she wishes and without the veil." Although the majority of classical patriarchs support women's "veiling" and "segregation" as a mechanism of sexual control over women, Ali Rasheed's awareness of the less rigid or alternative forms of control serves as a generalized force for change. He even goes further to ask Amira to marry after his death (14).
However, with the social and political changes overwhelming Egypt in the wake of Farouk's overthrow, Amira "had not argued" with her daughter Nefissa when she boldly announces that she will discard the veil. Believing that her freedom lies in discarding the veil, Nefissa tells her mother that she is "not going to wear the veil outside anymore". Rather, she does "no longer want to live the way [her] mother does", but she wants to be a "free woman" (122). As such, Amira's appreciation of traditional modesty makes her think of how "the world had been turned upside down". In her younger days, "the veil had been a status symbol of the rich, indicating that the wearer's husband was wealthy, his wife protected, waited on by servants, free from even the smallest task", while women of the poor class "did not wear a veil", as it hindered their work and daily toil. But now, and with such "modern ideas" (297), rich women go about "unveiled", as a symbol of their modern status, while the lower class "had taken up the *melaya*" in imitation of their ancient predecessors" (289).

In the same vein, Wood recounts how the Rasheed females "teased" their cousin Narjis for being the only Rasheed female who "had adopted the new "Islamic dress" (297). The assumption here is that most, if not all, the Rasheed women were unveiled. If they had been forced into "veiling", then at least Amira would deter them for discarding their veils. But "veiling" for the Rasheed women is no more than a traditional custom that becomes outmoded. This, in itself, negates Wood's claim that "veiling" of the Egyptian women had been explicitly connected to their status as the valuable property of men. This point is made clear by Mervat Hatem who expounds that during the 18th century, middle-class women like the Rasheeds in Wood's account, "were more restricted for fear that their chastity would be endangered and with it the family honor". Yet, when

veiling was extended to free women it was given a different rationale. Thus, "veiling" of Egyptian upper-class women was seen as "an expression of modesty", but not as a form of oppression as Wood suggests (261).

In effect, the multiplicity of positive and negative meanings associated with women's "veiling" display a complex and, at times, contradictory range of meanings. It is, as Katayoun Zarei Toossi points out, "positively associated with modesty, protection from unwanted male attention and desire, and liberation from the demands of consumerist capitalist economies and their investment in women's bodies. It signifies security and agency for women, and functions as a means of mobility in the public sphere" (642). Wood herself speaks to the same meaning. In an interview with the *Publishers Weekly*, Wood speaks of how "veiling" is a personal choice for Arab women: "To Arab women there's a freedom in the veil. To us, that's a contradiction in terms…They look at us half-naked women…They think we're barbaric and uncivilized, because we don't value virginity, chastity or family honor" (cited in Kendall, 77). As such, Daphne Grace reveals how, in today's changing world, women find veiling "gives up a certain security and a sense of identity. It also allows women "freedom to leave the house or to work without criticism, harassment, or violence from men". In other words, "veiling" may be argued to protect the woman from becoming the object of man's desire" (21).

Contrary to the popular belief that women are forced to wear "hijab", Daphne Grace notes how "veiling" in Egypt now is worn mainly "by upper-class and educated intellectual women" (20). However, in today's political climate, women's "veiling" has taken on a new symbolism either as a nationalist or ideological emblem representing a rejection of and a suspicion of all things Western. At any rate, women's "veiling" will continue to be one of the most controversial topics in feminist and postcolonial thought. As media spreads fear of terrorism and violence throughout Islamic territories, "veiling" will also continue to act as a representation of the oppression towards Oriental women collectively.

Besides "veiling", "seclusion", both physical and mental, is a recurring theme in *Virgins of Paradise* and one that epitomizes the location of segregated women, whose access to public space may be restricted or curtailed. Wood sets out to give us some examples of the daily life of Egyptian women living within the 'harem'[2]. She lists a specific set of rules and etiquette for every conduct. One of these rules is that women were not allowed to set foot outside the walls of their homes, as if they were captives. In Wood's view, it is unfair to treat women as if they were "invisible or did not exist." While arguing that this 'humiliating way' of dealing with women may be "rude" in other cultures, the author assumes that this is the "Arab way" of treating women (345). She points out how the patriarch Ali Rasheed has surrounded his house with a lush garden and a high wall "to protect his women, covering the windows with *mashrabiya* screens so that his wives and sisters could look out without being seen" (41)[3]. The author wonders how Egyptian women could be happy in such a "cloistered life" (124) in which mingling between men and women is forbidden! Yet, since factors like class, race, gender, sexual orientation and ability have to be taken into consideration when understanding masculinity, it is important to note the complexities of

masculine privilege from an intersectional figure. Masculine privilege is the idea that men are afforded unearned benefits, rights, and advantages in society. For example, one of the privileges that men have in *Virgins of Paradise* is that Ibrahim, for instance, "could enter any room he liked, whenever he liked, but the women, even his mother, had to ask permission to visit him on the other side of the house" (76).

In addition to this "curious male-female division of the house" (76), a woman was not allowed "to go anywhere she wanted unless she is escorted"; and unable to leave the country "without her husband's permission…" (123). Wood relates how Amira, for instance, has "never left the [Rasheed] house" (34) since her husband brought her there as a bride. Yet it was Amira's desire to "remain cloistered" (37) and reluctant to leave the Rasheed house. And when she left the house for once, she got "lost" in the streets of Cairo (149). Deep inside, Amira believes that "there are two occasions in a woman's life when she needs to go outside: when she leaves her father's house to go to her husband's, and when she leaves her husband's house in her coffin" (37).

Arguably, the chastity of females is a major concern to the Rasheeds and an important reason for their reluctance to send their women into the streets. In Amira's view, the streets are "fraught with evils and temptations that threatened a girl's honor" (213). Hence, women must not be in the company of unrelated males or travel without male chaperons from their own families. Thereupon, a woman was not allowed "to go out alone", especially if she is "a married woman" (339). The same is also applied to the "unmarried women" in the novel because their reputation is "a very fragile thing" (312). This "reputation" could be tarnished by mere proximity to men, and with it the honor of her family and her chances for marriage. Thus, measures are taken to keep the sexes separated and hence the conventional argument for the domestic seclusion of women as a source of stability and "honor".

On this basis, Amira's widowed daughter Nefissa, who was then just twenty years old, was forced to live in this "customary semiseclusion" (36). Furthermore, she is customarily "required to lead a quiet and chaste life" and is expected to "spend a year" mourning her dead husband (38). Such cultural customs and traditions, Wood believes, constitute "a major obstacle in the way of any change" (394). Like Wood, Fatima Mernissi argues that "since women are considered to be a destructive element", they are to be "spatially confined and excluded from matters other than those of the family". In this way, "female access to non-domestic space is put under control of males" (19). Mernissi further contends that the segregation between men and women is developed in Oriental societies "to prevent sexual interaction" between the two sexes (140) and as "a strategy to prevent women from trespassing in a male space". Thus, a woman "has no right to use male spaces". Yet if she enters such spaces, "she is upsetting the male's order and his peace of mind" (144).

In the same context, Wood recounts how the "conservative" patriarchs call for "the return of segregation of the sexes among the virginal and the unmarried", especially at schools. Such zealots insist that males and females should not sit together in a classroom" (365). Rather, "women had to

be sequestered" because they need "to be kept on a tighter reign [sic] so that their rampant sexuality will not be "a threat to men" (365). Wood exemplifies this emerging extremism inside the Egyptian society through Mohammed Omar Rasheed, Yasmina's son, who develops himself into a misogynist. Mohammed, who decides to trade his jeans for a "long white galabeya" which will be his shield against the dangers of women" (366), believes that the patriarchal laws "make sense", because without them no man can lead "a chaste and pious life" (451). He further assumes that "women are not to be trusted" because his mother, for instance, had betrayed his father and abandoned him. He cudgels his brains: "For the family to have declared her dead she must have committed a terrible sin, and therefore deserved to be ostracized" (365). As such, Mohammed, who laments Camelia dancing "lewdly in front of strange men", believes that it is "right and natural" for a man to have his wife endure "many pregnancies without complaint" (366).

With such misogynistic outlook, many who are not familiar with Islam may argue that it is the root cause of the lack of women's rights in Egypt. This, however, is not true. The prevailing attitudes regarding women and gender roles cross all religious boundaries. In effect, confining women to the home, rendering them invisible, or segregating them from all men except for close relatives has never been ordained by Islam. Margot Badran argues how such practices were "hallmarks of the harem culture" at the beginning of the nineteenth century when the domestic seclusion of women prevailed in the urban upper and middle classes, and among the rural gentry, while in fact gender segregation was observed, in varying degrees, by all classes. Badran, a towering feminist scholar, further argues that such practices "were also enforced because of deeply held sexual and moral beliefs, which were likewise associated with religion" while the "domestic seclusion" and "veiling" in Egypt were not practiced solely by Muslims but by Jews and Christians as well" (4-5). However, with men perceiving women as sexual beings, they were held to possess a more powerful sexual drive than men, posing a threat to society because of the chaos or temptation they could unleash. To make matters still more fraught, women's sexual purity was linked to the "honor" of men and the family, while men's sexual purity was neither linked to their own "honor" nor to that of their women and family. Thus, restricting women to their homes and camouflaging them if they went out were deemed necessary to the preservation of their purity and with it the "honor" of their men and families.

Seemingly, Wood ignores the rights attained and the achievements scored by Egyptian feminists during the decades preceding her novel. The Egyptian feminist movement has started as early as "the mid-nineteenth century", as Reina Lewis and Nancy Micklewright state. During that time, "the literate elite women of Egypt began writing about female emancipation, challenging the conventional prohibition on women speaking outside the home". Lewis and Micklewright further point out how Egyptian women's charitable organizations began in the first decade of the 20th century "with literary self-improvement groups involved middle-class and upper-class women". For most Egyptian women, these gender activities were seen as "a part of a project of national and social rejuvenation" (7-8).

Moreover, as modernity was scripted onto the Egyptian cultural canvas, Egyptian women assumed the agency and the capacity to exercise their will, to determine the shape of their own lives, and to partake in the shaping of their culture and society. Wood herself also sees "signs" of the changing times. She explains how the new "Personal Status Law", which is approved in the wake of King Farouk's overthrow, grants women "more rights and increased representation" in all governmental institutions, and the young women were "voluntarily taking up the veil" (363)[4]. As such, Wood observes how the "modest "melaya" and the "galabeya" were "nearly absent in this modern Cairo", as young men go by in blue jeans and western jackets, and girls display their legs beneath short skirts" (292-293)[5]. Also, when Amira visits the house located on Tree of Pearls street, where she met Ali Rasheed forty-six years back, she finds it torn out and turned into a school. Seeing girls in uniforms and with books and lunch boxes, Amira marvels on how "this house where I [she] had once been imprisoned in a harem is now a place where girls become educated and are free" (191). Moreover, with Egypt's moral liberal climate, Dahiba was able to publish the novel she had written ten years earlier (479). With such changes, the tropes of "harem" culture of seclusion, invisibility, restricted movements, and controlled "choices", were threatened with erasure.

- **Rebellious Women and Cultural Boundaries: *Yasmina and Camelia:***

The powerlessness of women within the Egyptian society, where they wield little power outside the walls of the then "harem", is further illustrated through the events experienced by two of the Rasheed female characters, Yasmina and Camelia. In a country both clinging to the past and flushed with change, both sisters are caught in the swirl of young womanhood seeking new opportunities. The author details their lives from childhood to the consequences of their adult choice to get their freedom back, fleeing from the patriarchal values that were holding sway in the Egyptian society into the post-World War II era. In their attempts to remove these cultural constraints placed upon women because of their gender, and to evolve a more equitable gender system involving new roles for women and new relations between genders, both Yasmina and Camelia pay a steep price. Their hunger for forbidden freedoms shamed them in the eyes of their family. But whether it is Camelia's and Yasmina's daring to express their individualities through their sensual rebellion that is a threat to society, or their exposure of women as subjugated, they cannot be tolerated and have to be destroyed.

Grown to womanhood under the watchful eye of Amira, both Yasmina and Camelia come of age in a society in which the "subjugation" of women is assumed; they are forbidden to leave the house, have no independent rights, and are mutilated to ensure purity and obedience. Some of the women submit, but a few struggle to speak out for equality and modernization, often at the risk of their lives. In their attempt to "repair injustices that are outside the law" (393-394), both sisters revolt against these restricting rules and outdated customs: "That which is written in the Koran [Qur'ān] we hold sacred, but those things which are not, we demand be corrected". They call for a law "requiring a man to inform his wife promptly if he has divorced her; for a man to inform a wife if he has a second or third wife; the right of the first wife to a divorce in the event of her husband is taking a second wife; and the right of a woman to seek divorce if her husband causes her bodily harm" (394).

However, at the age of sixteen, Yasmina finds herself forced to marry her cousin, Omar, who abuses her physically and psychologically. Wood too easily assumes that the Egyptian men have never exhibited an interest in expanding opportunities for women beyond the family role. Thus, when Yasmina announces her intention to continue her studies, Omar denies the permission. And when she says that she would not obey, he beats her "so hard" that she thought "he was going to hurt both her and the unborn child" (219). Omar strikes her because "she had talked back" to him when "she should not have". Most of the Rasheeds blame Yasmina for "running away", no matter how "badly Omar treated her". Worst of all, Yasmina has no other choice but to go back home because the Egyptian law gave Omar the right "to have his wife arrested for running away, and if necessary, the law permitted the policemen to literally drag the offending woman back to her husband" (220). When the police arrive "to arrest" Yasmina for "deserting her husband" (220), she refuses to go with them voluntarily. The Rasheed women, who care for their "honor" more than anything else, begin to wring their hands and wail for fear that if the neighbors learned of this, they would call Yasmina *nashiz* "freak" because she "disobeyed her husband" (121). Meanwhile, Yasmina cannot ask for divorce, because Amira believes she "brings dishonor upon her family" (228). Instead, Amira advises Yasmina to return and "make amends" (224) with her husband: "You are a wife now, you have responsibility to your husband… Always remember that a good wife acts as a veil around family secrets" (225).

Apparently, Wood expresses her disapproval of such a law which is "blind to man who abandons his wife and family, but punishes the abandoned woman for stealing food to feed her children. The law is severe with a wife who leaves her husband, but grants a husband the right to leave his wife at his pleasure, with no warning, no provision for her care" (421). She is also critical of the law which "permits the man to beat his wife or to use any means to keep her submissive" (422). But Omar, who is supposed to being a Muslim, seems to be unaware of the teachings of his religion which urge husbands to treat their wives with kindness. In the event of a family dispute, these teachings exhort the husband to treat his wife respectfully and not to overlook her positive aspects. A husband and wife have an equal role to play in providing support, comfort and protection for one another. Thus, there is no logical explanation given regarding Omar's being depicted as beating his wife or mistreating her. Any cruelty, domestic violence, or abuse committed by Omar can never be traced to any revelatory text. Chandra Mohanty insists that this violence against women "must be theorized and interpreted within specific societies in order both to understand it better and to organize effectively to change it" (24).

In this brutal and loveless marriage, Yasmina is banished because—in a heroic effort to save her family—she is raped and thereby 'dishonors' her family. Thus, once Yasmina is impregnated by Hassan and the secret of her rape is disclosed to the Rasheed family, she, however, tries to defend herself telling everyone that she did not go there out of her own will and that Hassan forced her into this relation: "He forced me! I tried to fight him, I tried to get away!... I was trying to save the family" (281). But Omar, once informed about Yasmina's rape and became aware that the child she bears is not his, instantly utters the formula of divorce in the face of Yasmina. Like his father

before him, who had proudly refused to utter Fatima's name, Ibrahim levels his gaze at Yasmina and rakes her over the coals: "A curse came upon this house the night you were born. A curse from God that I alone am to blame for. I regret the hour you were born…You are no longer my daughter. From this moment on you are *haram*, forbidden. You are not of our family, your name will never be spoken in this house again. It will be as if you were dead" (282).

Virgins of Paradise suggests that the female often has to struggle to claim her freedom as an individual. Thus, realizing that she has been cast out of the family, has been made "dead", deprived from her only son, and with no name, identity, or place to go, Yasmina decides to leave to England to find another life. Promising not to be "a woman existing on the periphery of other people's lives" (219), she insists on pursuing her dream of becoming a doctor, because physicians possess the power "over life and death". Someday she hopes to become a "woman with power", never again to be a "victim of men or curses or death sentences" (321). After spending a year in England, Yasmina comes to America at the invitation of their Egyptian neighbor, Maryam Misrahi, to stay with her family in California. When applying for her American visa, Yasmina changes the spelling of her first name to become 'Jasmine' (309). While in America, she receives a huge recognition. Wood recounts how her Professor, Declan Connor—who hires her to work on a translation project of a Third World health manual for use in the field—appreciates her efforts and writes her name on the cover of the book. He further predicts she will be an outstanding physician (341).

Looking at her sister's misery, Camelia thinks that their situations are very much the same. She, who takes her feelings and opinions and places them into words and sentences, believes that women in the Egyptian society are powerless because of the unfair laws and restricting traditions. While man is protected by "the society's approval of what he does", the woman "has nothing". She is "defenseless" and hence "she is doomed to lose". While men are "the sole proprietors of the planet", women do not even "own the sunshine [they] walk through" (344). Thus, to voice her latent rebellion out, Camelia first decides to "choose [her] husband", without any intervention on the part of the Rasheeds (210).

Hampered by these old-fashioned culture-based inequities of the older generations, Camelia initiates her rebellion against these cultural laws and social injustices to "help her oppressed sisters" (388). She, who turns sterile because of a face-saving operation after an accident which renders her "unclean", wonders: "[W]e must suffer in the name of honor? Yasmina must stay in a terrible marriage because of family honor?... I must live a useless life in the name of honor?". Believing that there "must be more to life than just honor", Camelia tells her grandmother: "I have to find my own life in my own way. I am leaving this house tonight, I must find where I belong" (229). She thinks about how an "unfortunate accident" turned her into a "freak" person where she is "condemned to a prison because of ignorance and prejudice" (226). Feeling a strange emotion almost like an awakening, she grows rebellious and tells Amira that the enforced laws are "unfair to women" because it is wrong "to force a woman to stay in an unhappy marriage" (226). She goes on: "I respect and honor God's law, but the laws made by men are wrong. I am only eighteen years old and I have been sentenced to a life that is more of a death than a life, because I cannot have

children. I am being punished for something I had no control over. For something that has nothing to do with honor but with physical ability" (228).Thus, from now on, Camelia advances with burning rebellion to oppose this patriarchal society and its traditional norms, thus ignoring her family's warnings and the strict rules they imposed upon her. She discards the veil "as soon as she was out of sight" of the Rasheed house. She assumes it is unfair that her brother and male cousins could wear anything they want, as if only women arouse temptation" (210). Thus, believing that there must be "more to life than just honor" (229), Camelia decides to leave the Rasheed house "to find [her] own life in [her] own way" (229). Breaking with her family's tradition, Camelia puts her sights to be not just "a famous dancer" (166), but she "devotes herself to becoming the greatest dancer Egypt had ever known" (262). Therefore, it is through the help of Dahiba, who later proves to be her castoff aunt Fatima, and her husband, that Camelia becomes "the Arab ideal for femininity" (410). Wood relates how the Cairo newspapers often referred to her as "Egypt's love goddess" (363). She is admired and applauded by thousands of men, but she keeps everyone at bay. She refuses all attempts to fall in love and gently "rebuffed" her admirers. She is "desirable", but "inaccessible" (210). Yet she leads "a chaste and moral private life", and at thirty-five she was still virgin (363).

What is most touching, though, is that no matter how far Yasmina and Camelia travelled—one physically and the second mentally— to escape their past, their fates are always tied to that quaint home on Virgins of Paradise Street, the witness to generations of the Rasheeds, throbbing with their memories, their mysteries, their fears, and their secrets. In the end, the estranged daughters are welcomed back into family. Yasmina's and Camelia's separate roads to adventure and fulfillment and love ultimately lead them back home. Thus, when Yasmina is finally summoned to Egypt to make amends with her dying father, she decides to distance herself from the cruel past and its unbearable memories. Amira tells her how her father is dying because he "lost his will to live" because of her: "The day you left Egypt, so your father's faith leaves him. He was convinced that God had forsaken him and now, on his deathbed, he still believes it" (9). Yasmina "dropped to her knees and Amira drew her into a tight embrace" (509). She expresses to her grandmother how she "felt so alone" and "wanted to come back", but "did not know how" (509). When Yasmina rushes to the Rasheed house to see her father, Wood describes how she, when touches her father's hand, "felt the trepidation, all doubt, all anger melt away". She overlooks all her past suffering and anguish: "What happened in the past…was over and done with; it had been written, and so it had happened. But now the future was written, and was that which they must face together" (515).
Ibrahim finally accepts that his daughters belong to "a new generation of women" he does not understand" (422). He believes that Yasmina's "banishment from the family "had indeed been like a death" and he "mourned as surely as if he had buried her" (477). Further, the idea of Yasmina becoming a doctor "very much appealed to him [Ibrahim]". He reflects: "If she were to become a doctor…then he could bring her into the practice with him…They would work as a team, share opinions, consult with each other" (240). He is even pleased with his daughter's "ambition and courage to speak up to him" (242). On her part, Amira also acknowledges that her daughters and granddaughters "possess a courage" that fills her "with pride" (422-423). In the end, she realizes

that she "had failed" in her duty to make certain of her granddaughters' happiness and future" (371).

For the most part, *Virgins of Paradise* is about the feminine consciousness in a patriarchal society. Yasmina's and Camelia's rebellion against the well-established social norms is a caution against gender discrimination. As rebellious feminists, they try to free themselves from the male dominance and explore their own life style. The suffering and hardships they face during their pursuit of freedom and equality help in attracting more people to think about the problems of patriarchy which women face. To a certain extent, Wood's account on Yasmina and Camelia is a brutally honest narrative that traces these two women's battles with family, society, country, cultural practices, and abuse when they decide to rebel against the restricting traditions and customs inherited from a long-gone past. It is also a message for women not to keep silent against male-dominance. Women should stand up and let their voice be heard.

It should be noted, however, that misogyny does not appeal to all Egyptian men, yet all Oriental men in traditional societies, including Egypt, have been raised within a cultural context of patriarchy, which operates on strong principles of exclusion and male privilege. Colonialism, monarchism, and totalitarianism, which have affected most Oriental countries at some point in their histories, have served to ingrain those patriarchal principles deep within the psyche of men and women alike. One could also argue that men have internalized the principles of authoritarianism, bolstered by the political systems under which they have lived. In turn, they have sought to rule women in these Oriental countries the way those countries were ruled by local despots and then colonized by Western powers. Arguably, this patriarchy serves to retain a man's sense of personal power when his own political power has been robbed from him. Thus, a clampdown on the advances of women and the use of physical and mental violence to restrict their growing autonomy is the backlash for those men who cannot handle the powerful changes in their societies, including the Egyptian one. The problem of women's rights in Egypt, thus, must be seen as part of the more general problems of the lack of democratic freedoms and protections for human rights in the region and the ingrained patterns of devaluing women that one finds in societies around the globe. With democratization, there will be hope that women may look forward to greater progress.

CONCLUSION

Patriarchy, as this paper argues, is but a male programming in terms of which men invent a sexed ideology that reinforces a system of male domination and female subordination. This system implies that women are maltreated in all civilizations as "a sexed being" or rather "an accidental being", responsible for unleashing the evil that destroys human existence. A close reading of Wood's narrative highlights the social system through which patriarchy dehumanizes women by pressurizing them to accept male supremacy as the eternal law of life. That is to say, the very aim of patriarchy is to empower the situation of man as a master and degrade that of the woman as a slave. Such is the leitmotif that forms the thematic structure of Wood's achievement. Wood utilizes

her narrative skills to show how patriarchy divides society into two main classes according to gender. This division has always urged feminist critics to confirm that the relationship between the male and female should be examined in the shade of "master-slave relation". A harsh critic of religious doctrines that supposedly suppress women, Wood also highlights some of Egypt's more sublime traditions and beliefs so as to portray a complete picture of the country. A bit an Egyptian soap opera, *Virgins of Paradise* is also a moving and intriguing tale of the evolution of a family through its births, deaths, weddings, and daily life. The several generations of the Rasheed women allow Wood to play out a spectrum of solutions to the female predicament. Yet, while helping us question, *Virgins of Paradise* reinforces stereotypes such as the exotic and oppressed Oriental women. Throughout, the images that Wood has of Egyptian women are stereotypical constructions. It is certainly a gross overgeneralization to say that an Islamic ethos correlates with a pattern of devaluing and mistreating women. The reader, therefore, can find an exaggerated emphasis on all issues that make Egyptian women different; "honor killings", "female circumcision", 'virginity tests', "domestic seclusion", the renewed obsession with "veiling" and "harem", "domestic seclusion", "forced marriages", "polygamy", "divorces", etc. Besides, depicting Egyptian women as victimized and existing on the margins of society defies credibility that such individuals could continue to wage the heroic daily battle that many Egyptian women in real life undertake to survive.

Notes:

[1] Barbara Wood. *Virgins of Paradise*. First Edition. New York: Random House, 1993. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

[2] The Arabic word "*harem"* (from which the English-language loan word *"harem"* derives) is applied both to women and to their quarters of the house. But far from being an isolated sexual prison, the "harem", according to Reina Lewis and Nancy Micklewright, was "a space in which women and families lived, worked and entertained" (19).

[3] "Mashrabiya" is the Arabic term given to a type of projecting oriel window enclosed with carved wood latticework located on the second floor of a building or higher, often lined with stained glass. The "mashrabiya" is an element of traditional Arabic architecture used since the Middle Ages up to the mid-20th century.

[4] "Status Law", commonly known as the "Personal Status Law", is the law which governs legal procedures that pertain to familial relations, including marriage, divorce, child custody, inheritance, etc.

[5] "Melaya" is a large rectangle of black silk cloth; "galabeya" is a traditional Egyptian garment native to the Nile Valley.

REFERENCES

[1] Abu-Loghod, Lila. *Writing Women's World: Bedouin Stories*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993. Print.

[2] Anker, Elizabeth. *Fictions of Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature*. Ithaki and London: Cornell University Press, 2012. Print.

[3] Badran, Margot. *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995. Print.

[4] *Contemporary Auth*ors: *A Bio-Bibliographical Guide to Current Writers in Fiction, General Nonfiction, Poetry, Journalism, Drama, Motion Pictures, Television, and Other Field*. New Revision Series, Vol. 289. Detroit: Cengage Gale, 2015. Print.

[5] Cooke, Miriam. *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001. Print.
[6] Grace, Daphne. *The Women in the Muslim Mask: Veiling and Identity in Postcolonial Literature*. London: Pluto Press, 2004. Print.
[7] Hatem, Mervat. "The Politics of Sexuality and Gender in Segregated Patriarchal Systems: The Case of Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Egypt". *Feminist Studies*, Summer 1986, Vol. 12, Issue 2: 250-274. Print.
[8] James, Kathryn. *Creating a Nation in Adversity: Advent of Egyptian Nationalism in British Occupation.* Unpublished M.A. Thesis. University of Nevada, Las Vegas. United States: 2012. Print.
[9] Khafagy, Fatma."Honour Killing in Egypt". A paper presented at UN Division for the Advancement of Women, 17 to 20 May 2005, Vienna, Austria. Print.
[10] Kanneh, Kadiatu. "The Difficult Politics of Wigs and Veils: Feminism and the Colonial Body". 346-348. In Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995. Print.
[11] Kendall, Lisa. "Barbara Wood/Kathryn Harvey: Both Historical Fiction and Romance Novels Come From Her Pen." *Publishers Weekly*, June 21, 1993, Vol. 240, Issue 25: 76-77. Print.
[12] Kumer, Rachel. "Barbara Wood". In *Twentieth Century Romance and Historical Writers*. Aruna Vasudvan and Lesley Henderson, (eds.). Third Edition. London: St. James Press, 1994. Print.
[13] Lewis, Reina and Nancy Micklewright, (eds.). *Gender, Modernity, and Liberty: Middle Eastern and Western Women's Writings: A Critical Source Book*. New York and London: I.B. Tauris, 2006. Print.
[14] Lindsey, Moore. *Arab, Muslim, Woman: Voice and Vision in Postcolonial Literature and Film.* London and New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.
[15] Mernissi, Fatima. *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Muslim Society*. Revised ed. London: Saqi Books, 2003. Print.
[16] Mikhail, Mona N. *Seen and Heard: A Century of Arab Women in Literature and Culture*. New York: Olive Branch Press, 2004. Print.
[17] Mohanty, Chandra. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003. Print.
[18] Perlmutter, Dawn. "The Semiotics of Honor Killing and Ritual Murder". *Anthropoetics: The Journal of Generative Anthropology*, Fall 2011, Vol. 17, Issue 1. 1-34. Print.
[19] "Review of *Virgins of Paradise* by Barbara Wood". *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Vol. 70, issue 1, winter 1994. 22-23. Print.
[20] Toossi, Katayoun Zarei. "The Conundrum of the Veil and Mohja Kahf's Literary Representations of Hijab". Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies. Volume 17, 2015, Issue 5. 640-656. Print.
[21] Weedon, Chris. "Postcolonial Feminist Criticism". 282-300. In *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*. Gill Plain and Susan Sellers, (eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Print.

[22] Wood, Barbara. *Virgins of Paradise*. First Edition. New York: Random House, 1993. Print.