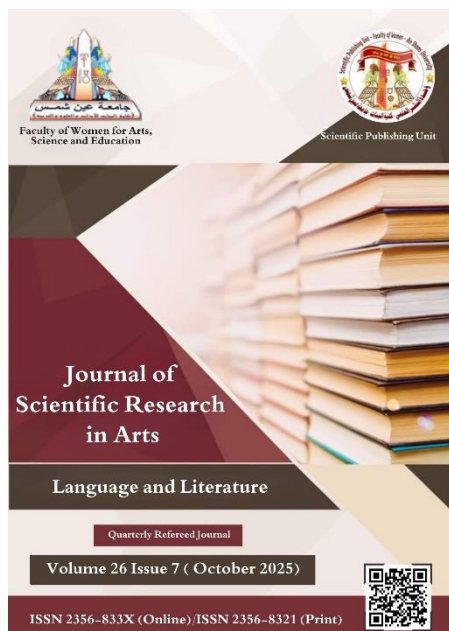




Negotiating Manhood: A Critique of Hegemonic Masculinity in Mohammad Al-Naas's *Bread on Uncle Milad's Table*

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Abstract

This paper examines the destructive impact of hegemonic masculinity on individuals and society in Mohammad Al-Naas's *Bread on Uncle Milad's Table* (2021). While gender studies focus on women's oppression in patriarchal societies, few theorists, such as Connell, Kimell, and hooks, study men and masculinity. However, patriarchy not only subjugates women but also enforces narrow ideals of masculinity that can be oppressive to men themselves. Hegemonic masculinity is a concept coined by Raewyn Connell to explain how patriarchal society manipulates and oppresses both women and less privileged men. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the social practices and cultural norms that establish and legitimize men's dominant position and power dynamic in society. It encourages traits like dominance, aggression, and physical strength, which can lead to various forms of violence. The rigid standards of hegemonic masculinity can be detrimental to men themselves. Drawing on Connell's framework, this paper examines how Mohammad Al-Naas critiques hegemonic masculinity in contemporary Libyan society through his novel *Bread on Uncle Milad's Table* (2021). Milad, the protagonist, suffers from an identity crisis because he fails to accomplish the rigid gender role of his society. The fragmentation of his identity leads him to be violent and destroy his life.

Keywords: Hegemonic masculinity, Raewyn Connell, *Bread on Uncle Milad's Table*, violence, gender expectations

Introduction

Gender is a central aspect of personal identity, social relationships, and culture, shaping individuals' values, aspirations, and roles. Gender is socially constructed based on performing repeated activities assigned to individuals by cultural norms. Judith Butler (1999) asserts that gender is not something an individual accomplishes once and for all. It is "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts with rigid regularity," in which being a man or a woman is a repeated process, depending on cultural norms (33). Thus, performing particular acts following historically and socially constructed cultural norms defines masculinity and femininity. In other words, being male or female is a biological issue, while being masculine or feminine depends on social and cultural norms.

For generations, feminists in gender studies have focused on the patriarchal oppression of women and the exclusion of women's experience from patriarchal culture. This focus led to the invisibility of men and masculinity studies in feminist research. Thus, "by denying implicitly or explicitly that men were gendered, they would escape scrutiny and resist critique or the need to change" (Resser, 2020, p. 16), which aims to maintain their power. In this sense, studying masculinity becomes an attempt to make it visible and manifest its characteristics that lead to power and dominance over women. Raewyn Connell (2001), among others, studies masculinity to understand the power of gender roles in society. She explains that gender is about power and desire, and to understand gender inequalities, "it is essential to research the more privileged group as well as the less privileged" (43). Masculinity, she argues, is a social position shaped by gender hierarchies and one that impacts the body, psyche, and cultural experience. It is a place in gender relations, a position of men in gender order that affects bodily experience, personality, and culture (*Masculinities*, 2005, p. 71). This position enables patriarchal society to establish men's power to subordinate women.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Throughout studying masculinity, Connell (2005) asserts that patriarchal society oppresses and manipulates less privileged men as well as women. To explain this idea, she introduces the concept of hegemonic masculinity. She defines it as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently

accepted answers to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantee (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and subordination of women” (77). This definition reflects the goal of patriarchal society by allowing men’s dominance over women. It is established by the correspondence between cultural norms or ideals and social institutions. In other words, it is a cultural ideal that reinforces male privilege and power. It also legitimizes men’s dominant positions that subordinate women and other masculinities that do not fit the hegemonic model.

For Connell (2005), the word hegemony is essential in describing hegemonic masculinity because hegemony relates to cultural dominance in the society as a whole, encouraging specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men (78). Using the Gramscian concept of hegemony, Connell emphasizes that hegemonic masculinity is not merely about individual behaviors but is deeply embedded in societal structures and power dynamics. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) state that hegemony means “ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion.” It does not always relate to violence, but it could be supported by force (832). Accordingly, hegemonic masculinity can be understood in relation to two different but inseparable kinds of hegemony, namely, external and internal. The external hegemony refers to the oppression and domination of women, while internal hegemony refers to hegemony over other masculinities. In this second term of hegemony, “hegemonic masculinity refers to a social ascendancy of one group of men over others” (Demetriou, 2001, p. 341). In this sense, internal hegemony oppresses and limits males’ options if they do not conform to the cultural norms and gender roles.

As it depends on cultural norms, hegemonic masculinity promotes dominant male behaviors. It consists of a set of values established by men in power to organize society and “stabilize rather than deconstruct gender order” (Hobbs, 2013, p. 386). It establishes men’s identity, ideals, and interaction with patriarchy. For Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), hegemonic masculinity embodies the most “honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men” (832). To maintain male dominance, the ideal masculine must have specific characteristics, such as wealth, attractiveness, physical abilities, and sexual potency. In this sense, hegemonic masculinity forms a hierarchy of masculinities that enables some men to access power, which

includes and excludes some of them. Thus, “most men are not fully able to practice hegemonic masculinity because it requires access to particular social resources” (Inhorn, 2012, p. 42). In other words, hegemonic masculinity creates inequality among men and idealizes the gender roles that are described as manly. It is associated with violence, aggression, competitiveness, and emotional suppression.

Accordingly, some theorists criticize the concept of hegemonic masculinity because it oversimplifies masculinity and gender roles in society. Inhorn (2012) argues that the “application of hegemonic masculinity theory may have the unintended consequence of reducing masculinity to a typology, instead of elucidating masculinity as a dynamic social practice” (45). The concept is also critiqued for promoting “toxic masculinity,” which encourages violence and emotional repression. However, the concept becomes successful in identifying how some men dominate women and other men (Hearn, 2004, p. 58). It reveals that there are multiple types of masculinity, such as hegemonic, subordinated, and marginalized masculinities. In this sense, Connell (2005) asserts that hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed type. It differs from time to time and from place to place, depending on the environment that produces it. It is “the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable” (76). Thus, hegemonic masculinity is not a static but a dynamic concept that differs according to society’s cultural norms.

Bread on Uncle Milad’s Table: Gender Roles and the Image of Masculinity

In conservative societies, such as the Middle East, hegemonic masculinity is a powerful force and culturally idealized. In Middle Eastern societies, masculinity has specific characteristics, often involving physical strength, aggression, dominance, sexual abilities, repression of emotion, and leadership. Additionally, “hegemonic masculine man is said to be a *family patriarch*” (Inhorn, 2012, p. 49). In his novel *Bread on Uncle Milad’s Table* (2021)¹, Mohammad Al-Naas introduces a critique of hegemonic masculinity in Libyan society. Milad, the protagonist, is the only young man among four sisters. He lives in a society that is defined by specific gender roles, which he fails to accomplish for most of his life. He has feminine characteristics in his personality. In vain, his father tries to make him a man, according to society’s definition of masculinity, but he fails due to Milad’s fragile personality. He marries Zaineb, a

rebellious girl, and their life becomes a challenge to the natural gender roles assigned by their society. Milad stays at home, caring for the household, while Zaineb goes to work. This reversal of traditional roles provokes family disapproval. The oppression of society over Milad leads him to attempt to confirm the stereotypical image of masculinity by practicing violence against his sisters and wife.

The novel explores the theme of gender roles and the image of masculinity in Libyan society. Gender roles are socially constructed based on performing repeated activities assigned to individuals by cultural norms. For example, “the traditional feminine gender role would be to nurture her family by working full-time within the home rather than taking employment outside of the home.” On the other hand, men are supposed to work outside the home and lead the family (Blackstone, 2003, p. 337). Any change in these roles leads to the marginalization of both men and women. In *Bread on Uncle Milad's Table*, Milad enjoys working at home, cooking, cleaning the house, and waiting for his wife to return from work; Zaineb financially supports the family. When Milad's mother accidentally discovers that her son cares about the housework, she feels ashamed and blames him for not being a man. The traditional view of masculinity suggests that men should lead the household by providing for financial needs and making important family decisions. Milad's mother told him, الرجل يزرع و يحصد و المرأة تطبخ، الرجل يبني و يعمر و المرأة تنظف ما بناه، هذا هو الاتفاق الضمني بين الجنسين، وأي خلل يجب إصلاحه " "The man plants and reaps, and the woman cooks, the man builds and develops, and the woman cleans what he built. This is the implicit agreement between the sexes; any defect must be corrected" (Al-Naas, 2021, p. 31). Society constructs a definite role for each gender, and any deviation from these roles leads to a kind of violence against those persons. Myscha Burton (2014) asserts, “Men who do not achieve the idealized form of masculinity are viewed as deviant from other men because they do not fit within the rigid norms of hegemonic masculinity” (51). Therefore, they become subject to violence from others.

In the novel, Milad does not live up to masculine ideals. He is usually depicted as respecting women and dealing with them differently. He appears affectionate and cares about his sisters' feminine issues. He also deals with his wife differently, allowing her to try different things society refuses, such as smoking cigarettes and wearing a swimsuit. Being affectionate, emotional, and caring does not belong to the masculine image according to societal norms. To explain this dilemma in Milad's life, Al-Naas starts his novel with a famous

Libyan proverb, "عليه وخالها ميلاد" "A family and their maternal uncle Milad." He explains that this proverb refers to the man who has no authority over women in his family. This proverb indicates the power of stereotypical images about men and women in Libyan society, in which it not only insults men but also accuses women of promiscuity and being immoral. This proverb is central in defining the protagonist's character, in which he appears weak and unable to control his wife and sisters.

Males' image depends on gender stereotypes, which can be used to justify and maintain hegemonic masculinity. Gender stereotypes reflect expectations about a particular social group. Thus, boys need their fathers' approval and constantly desire to be like their fathers. Michael Kimmel (1994) argues, "Manhood is demonstrated for other men's approval. It is other men who evaluate the performance" (128). Milad's father feels ashamed because of Milad's attitude towards his sisters and his failure to act according to the expectations of gender roles. The failure to gain the father's approval leads to Milad's identity crisis. He asserts: "كنت أقرأ في عينيه خيبته و تحسره علي انجاب رجل مثلي ... كان يلوم نفسه." "I could see in his eyes his disappointment in having a son like me... He was blaming himself" (Al-Naas, 2021, p. 19). The father attempted to shape Milad's identity according to the societal norms, sometimes by violence and sometimes by convincing him about the importance of being a man. He told him, "لقد لاحظت فيك ميوعة، يجب أن تسترجل. أخواتك سيحتجن إلى رجل بجانبهن قريباً" "I have noticed you have a soft nature. You need to act like a man. Your sisters need you to be a man very soon" (18). He teaches him that he can accompany his sisters only as a father or guardian. The father summarizes the gender roles that Milad fails to fulfill. He warns him, "يا ولد يا غبي، أنت رجل، لا يجوز للرجل أن يجالس النساء انهم كالصالح و الخميرة" "Hey idiot boy, you are a man, it is not appropriate for a man to sit with women. They are like salt and yeast" (18). The father follows the gender roles of his society, in which he believes that companionship between men and women will corrupt them as salt corrupts yeast.

The relationship between males and females in Libyan society highlights the rigid gender roles and the expectations placed on men. The gender stereotypes reflect cultural dominance, which represents a framework of gender relations. To illustrate this framework, Al-Naas uses traditional proverbs at the beginning of each chapter in the novel to introduce a clear idea about how society deals with gender roles and gender identity, establishes male dominance, and Milad's crisis in this society. These proverbs reflect the societal norms and values of Libyan

culture, reflecting the societal disdain for women and the oppression of men who do not conform to these norms. For example, "البنات زريعة ابليس" "Girls are devil's spawn" (Al-Naas, 2021, p. 126), and "Live a day as a rooster, not ten as a hen" (32) "تعيش يوم ديك ولا عشرة دجاجة." In Arabic culture, the rooster symbolizes power and control, while the hen represents weakness and submission. Such proverbs reinforce patriarchal norms and gender roles, which lead to Milad's internal conflict. Al-Naas uses Milad's conflict to challenge the gender roles in his society by depicting Milad as a subordinated male. According to Connell (2005), subordinated masculinity refers to a type of masculinity that is marginalized in contrast to hegemonic masculinity. Subordinated masculinity is often associated with characteristics that are perceived as feminine, such as emotional expressiveness and gentleness. It is "at the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men" (6). Thus, hegemonic masculinity maintains its dominance by subordinating this type of masculinity.

Milad and Subordinated Masculinity

The traditional gender stereotypes reinforce boundaries between genders and closely support gender ideologies, which define masculinity and femininity. Kimmel (1994) asserts that the definition of masculinity depends on the accumulation of cultural symbols that denote manhood. Masculinity is about "those standards being used against women to prevent their inclusion in public life and their consignment to a devalued private sphere" (125). Milad fails to embody hegemonic masculinity since he cannot preserve the cultural symbols that represent manhood in society. He is not successful, strong, cruel, or violent. In this framework, manhood equates to power and control. Therefore, lacking cruelty, power, or violence implies you are not a real man. Throughout the novel, Milad appears as a subordinate male. Demerakis Demetriou (2001) argues that "some masculinities are subordinated not because they lack a particular transhistorical quality or because they are naturally inferior to others but because the configuration of practice they embody is consistent with the currently accepted strategy for the subordination of women" (344). Thus, hegemonic masculinity encourages some traits such as aggression, dominance, and physical strength, which can lead to various forms of violence, especially toward women and other masculinities.

Milad's attitude towards his sister and wife highlights his failure to achieve traditional masculine roles. For Milad, his father was the ideal masculine figure

whom he must learn from, regardless of his cruelty. He needs to prove himself to his father, yet he fails to do so, and he loses the bakery after his father's death. The bakery was the space where Milad asserted his identity. Therefore, Milad's sense of subordination is deepened when the uncle steals the bakery after the father's death, leaving Milad feeling vulnerable and powerless. For most of his life, Milad has failed to fulfill the societal norms that define masculinity, which enhances his sense of fragmentation and subordination. He says, *أضعت جزءا كبيرا* "I wasted a significant part of my youth torn between self-acceptance and self-rejection" (Al-Naas, 2021, p. 37). Failing to accomplish society's masculine norms leads Milad to be fragile and oppressed within his family and colleagues. Masculinity is about the power that maintains "the real-life power that men have over women and some men over other men (Kimmel, 1994, p. 125). Thus, Milad fails to be part of the hegemonic masculinity since he is powerless toward his uncle, sisters, and wife.

After his father's death, Milad joins the military service to fulfill his father's wish. The father believed that military service would help his son become a man according to societal norms. Clair Duncanson (2015) points out, 'Military are important sites for the investigation of hegemonic masculinity' (232). In the camp, Milad suffered more because he was physically weak and psychologically fragile. The Madonna, the leader of the camp, tortures him, bullying him because of his weakness. He addresses Milad as "the weak man" and "Milad the dough." In the camp, Milad fails to achieve male characteristics, where he faces different levels of hegemonic masculinities, which enhance his sense of inferiority and fragility. Connell (2005) asserts that different forms of masculinity are in "constant interaction," in which the formation of hegemonic masculinities depends on the existence of subordinated men as well as women (198). The role of this interaction between dominant and subordinated masculinities is to maintain the patriarchal hegemony. Throughout the novel, Milad represents subordinated masculinity because of his fragile identity and physical weakness.

Moreover, Milad's sense of subordination is deepened because of his infertility. Infertility shapes masculinity in Libyan society. It is strongly linked to men's sense of manhood and social status. It is seen as a masculine failure, so it becomes a source of anxiety and frustration. Burton (2014) asserts, "Infertile men are seen as deviant based on the norms associated with hegemonic masculinity; infertility causes men to reconstruct and renegotiate their own male identity because they deviate from the constructed norms of hegemonic masculinity" (49).

The inability to have children can lead to psychological distress and suicide in extreme cases. Milad emphasizes this point by saying "أمر الانجاب مرهق للزوجين في مجتمعنا. شعبان، أحد الجيران، انتحر بعد تحرشات من ابيه بأنه عقيم، بعد أن رأى اخوته جميعا يتكاثرون. "In our society, childbearing is exhausting for couples. Shaaban, one of the neighbors, committed suicide after harassment from his father because he was infertile. He saw all his siblings having children despite him being the eldest. It was a tragic matter for me as well" (Al-Naas, 2021, p. 62). Infertile men face social stigma and feel isolated because of their failure to fulfill patriarchal expectations.

Thus, men perceive infertility as a failure to fulfil the essential aspect of the hegemonic masculine role. Infertility leads them to feel inadequate, shameful, vulnerable, and diminishes their self-esteem. Burton (2014) points out that a man's ability to perform sexually and his capacity to procreate construct a man's concept of his masculinity (52). In this sense, infertility causes an identity crisis and enhances Milad's sense of subordination. He wonders:

سألت الله ما الذي فعلته حتى تعاملني الحياة بهذه الطريقة. ألأنني كنت ولدا وحيدا لأخوات أربع، ولأنني تعلمت ضفر شعر اخواتي و أنا في العاشرة، وصناعة الحلوى النسائية في الثانية عشر، و لأنني صنعت الخبز و الكعك و الحلويات و البريوش و تعلمت الطبخ منذ طفولتي؟ ربما لأنني رضيت أن أغسل ملابس زوجتي و أرتبها و أكويها، و أنظف بيتها و أغسل أوانيها؟ ربما لأنني تركت فراش الزوجية و اللعب منذ يئسنا من إنجاب الأطفال، متى كان ذلك؟ نعم، عيد ميلادي الأربعين، عيد الميلاد نفسه الذي تحولت فيه تماما الى ميلاد الذي يسخر منه الحي كله، و يوما ما ستسخر منه البلاد و الكوكب اجمع.

I asked God what I had done to make life treat me this way. Was it because I was the only boy among four sisters, because I learned to braid my sisters' hair at ten, and to make women's sweets at twelve, and because I made bread, cakes, pastries, brioche, and learned to cook since my childhood? Perhaps it's because I agreed to wash my wife's clothes, arrange them, iron them, and clean her house and wash her dishes? Perhaps because I left the marital bed and played around since we despaired of having children? When was that? Yes, my fortieth birthday, the very birthday on which I completely turned into the 'Milad' that the whole neighborhood mocks, and one day the countries and the entire planet will mock (Al-Naas, 2021, pp. 44-5)

Men attempt to embody the hegemonic form of masculinity and strive to adjust to this kind of masculinity. Burton (2014) argues that infertility encourages men

to conform to hegemonic masculinity, since sexuality is vital to the construction of hegemonic masculinity, and infertility becomes a threat to this norm (51). Thus, infertility is considered a challenge to masculine aspects in society and may lead to feelings of shame, inadequacy, and a loss of status. It, therefore, causes an identity crisis, which leads the infertile man to practice violence to assert his manhood.

Throughout the novel, although he has sexual virility, Milad appears as a man who suffers because he fails to conform to traditional standards of masculinity, especially his failure to be a father. This crisis appears in his ambivalent attitude towards sex. Besides the idea of fertility, the idea of sexual virility is crucial in identifying hegemonic masculinity. It also becomes a source of anxiety and distress in men's lives. For hegemonic masculinity, genitalia become a symbol of power, dominance, and virility. In *Bread on Uncle Milad's Table*, Al-Nass uses genitalia, especially the penis, to reflect Milad's subordination and deconstruct the traditional concept of masculinity, which links manhood with strength, control, power, and sexual virility. Before Milad married Zaineb, Al-Abssi, Milad's cousin, spent time teaching him how to be a man by forcing him to have sexual intercourse with whores such as "Khadoja." For Al-Abssi, being a man means having multiple sexual affairs. Milad mentions that "كانت للعبسي محاولات عديدة لجعلي 'فحلا' قبل زواجي بزينة، و حتي بعد ذلك، كان يؤمن أن الرجل "Prior to my marriage to Zaineb and even afterword, Al-Abssi made numerous attempts to make me a "stud." He believes that a man is not embarrassed by anything except the extent of his penis's experience in making women cry and yearn for him" (Al-Naas, 2021, p. 75). However, Milad fails to do this before Zaineb, which enhances his sense of subordination and fragility.

In patriarchal societies, men perceive their self-esteem through the number of heterosexual encounters during their lives. Julio Camacho-Ruiz et.al (2025) assert that "These experiences must be validated by their peer groups, which are primarily responsible for conferring prestige on the 'conquering' man and labeling him as successful and virile" (2). Accordingly, people see and evaluate themselves through the mirror of others.² Al-Nass uses the symbol of the penis as a source of anxiety and frustration, instead of being a symbol of strength and manhood. It becomes an expression of sexual repression and the crisis of masculinity that Milad suffers from, which appears in his tense relationship with his wife later. Moreover, by using male genitalia as a symbol of power and

control, Al-Nass exposes the contradictions and restrictions that society imposes on men. He asserts that the excessive focus on sexuality can lead to isolation, depression, and despair in men.

To enhance the sense of subordination, Al-Abssi emasculates Milad, in many situations, attempting to expose him as not being a man enough in the eyes of his friends and family. Al-Abssi pressures Milad by telling him he has no control over his sisters and wife. He told him that his daughter's sister, Hanadi, is wearing inappropriate clothes, and his wife betrays him with her boss. Al-Abssi urges Milad to act to prove he is a real man. Because of such pressure and his soft nature, Milad feels ashamed. He says:

لا أريد أن انهك كاهلك بعدد المرات التي بكيت فيها فقط لأنني لم استطع أن أكون رجلا حقيقيا كما
أرادني أبي. كم مرة شعرت أن أمرا سيئا داخلي ، روحا شريرة ، شيطانا، جنيا يتلبسني يحاول
محو رجولتي

I do not want to burden you with the number of times I cried simply because I could not be the real man my father wanted me to be. How often I felt there was something bad inside me, an evil spirit, a devil, a jinn possessing me, trying to erase my manhood (Al-Naas, 2021, p. 21)

Shame helps patriarchal men to subordinate other men by silencing them. Kimmel (1994) argues, "Shame leads to silence – the silence that keeps other people believing that we actually approve of the things that are done to women, to minorities" (131). As a representative of subordinated masculinity, Milad realizes that he must keep silent because he fails to treat women like other men in his society. He says,

كان علي ذلك اليوم أن استنتج القوانين التي اتفق مجتمعنا على وضعها، ومنها أن العفوية في الحديث عما
يجول في خاطرك قد تشكل خطرا عليك و على من حولك. تعلمت الدرس الخطأ ، تعلمت أن أصمت، لأنني
في الوقت ذاته لم أرد خيانة وصية أبي في هجران الكذب و التمويه. حاولت مرارا عديدة أن أتغلب على
عاداتي التي اكتسبتها من أخواتي منذ نعومة أظفاري. لكن دون جدوى

That day, I had to deduce the rules that our society had agreed upon, including that spontaneity in speaking about what is on your mind could pose a danger to you and those around you. I learned the wrong lesson; I learned to be silent because, at the same time, I did not want to betray my father's commandment to forsake lying and deception. I tried many times to overcome the habits I had acquired from my sisters since childhood, but to no avail (Al-Naas, 2021, p. 20)

Milad's inability to conform to society's norms about masculinity makes him a subordinate male and subject to violence from other men in his society.

The Destructive Effect of Hegemonic Masculinity on Milad

Failing to fulfill the expectations of masculinity leads Milad to be subject to violence from his father and other men in his society, such as Madonna and Al-Abssi. As a subordinated male, he suffers physically and emotionally. The father beats him because of his feminine behavior, especially toward his sisters. Milad remembers that his father used the belt to beat him, telling him, "سأصنع منك" "I will make a man out of you, even if it is the last day of my life" (129). In patriarchal societies, violence is normal, especially domestic violence. Hegemonic masculinity encourages violent behavior toward women and weak men. Violence, therefore, functions as a tool of implicit and explicit pressure to enforce conformity to dominant norms.

Violence becomes a tool for asserting power and maintaining the hierarchical structure of hegemonic masculinity. Throughout the novel, Al-Naas examines the effect of the hegemonic idea on individuals, especially Milad. Milad is not only subject to violence from other men, but also practices violence against himself every time he fails to meet the criteria of masculinity. He attempts to take his own life three times due to feelings of powerlessness and social marginalization. One of the destructive effects of hegemonic masculinity is that it limits men's emotional expression. To maintain power, men are not required to express their emotions in social relations like women. This suppression can lead men to commit suicide. Jo River and Michael Flood (2021) point out that suicide becomes a means of silencing painful emotions. They add, "Paradoxically, suicide could also become an alternative means of demonstrating masculinity, whereby the body becomes both the vehicle and object of violence" (916). In this sense, suicide becomes an attempt to pursue a hegemonic pattern of masculinity. Throughout the novel, Milad attempts to commit suicide every time he becomes a subject of violence from other men. River and Flood note that men who attempt suicide conceal emotions to pursue a hegemonic model of masculinity (923). Milad asserts: "لطالما فكرت في الانتحار و لأتفه الأسباب. أول مرة فكرت بها في الانتحار كانت في العسكرية، ثم عندما رفضت زينب أن تحدثني لأيام ثلاث. هربت من فكرة الطلاق الى فكرة إنهاء حياتي" "For trivial reasons, I have often thought about suicide. The first time I thought about suicide was during military service, and when Zaineb refused to talk to me for three days. I escaped from the idea of divorce to the idea of ending my life"

(Al-Naas, 2021, p. 20). After the first attempt of suicide, Milad confirms that ذهبت أيام المعسكر، لكن ما حملته كان ظلاميا. قررت عند خروجي، من البوابة الكبيرة، انني صرت رجلا "The days of the camp have passed, but they were very painful. Upon leaving the big gate, I decided that I had become a man as my father and the Madonna wanted. I can now do whatever I want" (45). However, the camp does not teach Milad how to be a man. Instead, it enhances his sense of weakness and fragility. Therefore, he attempts to commit suicide again when he hits his wife, and when Al-Abssi tells him about his wife's infidelity.

Milad believes that he must conform to society's norms of masculinity. He has no choice because Al-Abssi and other men in his society accuse him of not being a man, as he is not practicing violence toward his wife, sisters, and sister's daughter. He asks himself, "هل يمكن أن استعيد رجولتي؟ وكيف سأتمكن من ذلك؟ ثمة خياران، "Can I regain my masculinity? And how can I do that? There are only two options: either I regain my masculinity, or I end my life" (23). However, Milad fails to end his life three times, so he chooses to regain his masculinity. He discovers that military service could not teach him how to be a man because "الرجولة لا تأتي من قتل الارانب بيديك و أكلها نيئة ولا تأتي من ساعات "Masculinity does not come from killing rabbits with bare hands and eating them raw, nor does it come from hours you stand under the sun" (22-3). Therefore, he wants someone to teach him how to be a man, and he thinks of Al-Abssi. Hanan Mabrouk (2023) points out that Al-Abssi represents the perfect conventional man, whom Milad tries to be like due to the social and family pressure. She adds that Milad is a victim of outdated cultural standards that stigmatize and accuse him. He tries to justify a sin he did not commit and erase a shame he did not cause by searching for another gender identity (87). By seeking another gender identity, Milad thinks that Al-Abssi's model is the way, especially his practice of violence against others.

In his attempt to prove his masculinity, Milad practices violence against his sisters, although this is not his true nature. He remembers, "مرة ضربت اختي الصغرى فقط لأنني وجدت لديها رسالة من أحد الأولاد الذين يدرسون معها في المدرسة، لكن ارتعاشي "Once I hit my little sister because I found a letter from one of the boys who studied with her at school, but my trembling from the act made me sweat from the monster hiding inside me" (20). He imitates his father's way of treating women. Haidar Mahallati (2023) explains that following the father's image of masculinity leads Milad to deny his

true self, replacing it with a violent personality (276). Milad needs to prove himself to his father by practicing violence against his sister because hegemonic masculinity is deeply embedded in the societal structure and power dynamics. In other words, as Keagan Gardiner (2002) argues, gender is deeply structured into society, shaping an individual's psychology, identity, and sexuality, and eradicating it will be extremely difficult (3). In this sense, traditional gender roles limit individuals' opportunities and choices.

Moreover, a failure to achieve the criteria of manhood may encourage some men to take "corrective action in the form of discriminatory violence, in this case, directed to more vulnerable persons" (Allison & Klein, 2021, p. 6861). Those men use violence toward vulnerable persons, such as women and subordinated men, to achieve and reaffirm their masculinity. Because hegemonic masculinity depends on power relations and hierarchical status within society, violence is directed toward vulnerable persons as a source of demonstrating power and reaffirming masculinity. In *Bread on Uncle Milad's Table*, Al-Abssi accuses Milad's wife of infidelity, saying that he saw her with another man. He convinces Milad to hit Zaineab and gives him his belt, and tells him:

النساء يرعبهن الحزام، الحزام هو سلاح الرجل القاهر. عد الى البيت، خذ حزامك و اجلدها، بلا مقدمات، لا تبرر لنفسك او لها بأنك تضربها لأنها تخونك، فقط اجلدها و سترى، ستنتسى ذلك السمين الوقح، بل ستطيعك في كل ما تقوله، حتي لو قلت لها أن تقتل نفسها، افعلها يا ميلاد، من أجل راحتك. هل يحتاج الرجل منا الى دليل أو سبب ليضرب زوجته؟ قل لي

Belt terrifies women; the belt is the weapon of the most powerful man. Go home, take your belt, and flog her. Do not justify to yourself or her that you are hitting her because she is betraying you, just flog her and you will see, she will forget that rude fat man, and she will obey in everything you say, even if you tell her to kill herself. Do it, Milad, for your comfort... does a man need a reason to beat his wife? Tell me (Al-Naas, 2021, p. 163)

Al-Abssi's words encourage Milad to be violent against his wife. He suspects that she betrays him, so he feels that his masculinity is in danger. He thinks that he needs to take action to regain his reputation. He says: "سمعت الجملة: "عيلة و خالها" ميلاد" في أماكن مختلفة. وصلت شهرتي حتى في أحياء المدينة، وأنا أحاول مسحها سمعتها حتى ضقت بها ذرعا. ذهبت بعد تخرجي من "اكاديمية" العبسي الى بيت العائلة، حتى انهي المسألة، و استعيد هويتي" "I kept hearing the phrase: "a family and its maternal Uncle Milad," in different places. My reputation spread through the city's neighborhood. I try to erase it..... I heard it till I could not stand it anymore. After graduating from Al-Abssi's

academy, I went to the family home to end this matter and regain my dignity” (154). Patriarchal society oppressed Milad because of his soft nature. Al-Abssi and other men in society treat Milad as a subordinate, making him angry. This emotion manifests as violent outbursts directed at his sisters and wife.

Throughout the novel, Al-Naas examines the effect of the hegemonic idea on individuals, especially Milad. Milad’s struggle highlights the toxic implications of hegemonic masculinity. As he tries to be part of society, he sees Al-Abssi as the model he needs to imitate. Milad’s relationship with Al-Abssi is complex. For Milad, Al-Abssi was the example of the man he wanted to be. He asks himself if Al-Abssi can teach him how to be a man. Al-Abssi embodies traditional masculinity with qualities like physical strength, control over others, and multiple sexual relationships. Al-Abssi despises women and thinks that everything a woman says is an invitation to sex. This creates internal conflict for Milad as he tries to fit into traditional masculinity while desiring to break free from patriarchal constraints. Milad begins to question the concept of masculinity and rejects the toxic masculinity that Al-Abssi represents. Throughout his relationship with Al-Abssi, Milad comes to realize that masculinity is not a single, unified concept. He believes that there must be another way to be a man. Unlike Al-Abssi, Milad respects women and does not understand why men in his society treat women violently. Throughout telling his story, Milad rejects the traditional model of masculinity imposed by society.

In Milad’s journey, Al-Naas describes the pressures society places on subordinate men like Milad and how he is defeated in the face of masculinity norms in his society. By describing these pressures, Al-Naas, according to Hoda El-Sheikh (2023), justifies what happened at the end of the novel when Milad abandons his sisters and kills his beloved wife, leaving her as if she is sleeping at home as he is in a dream and will wake up (29-30). By killing Zaineb because of the pressure of society on Milad, Al-Naas advocates for a more compassionate understanding of what it means to be a man. At the end of Milad’s story, which he tells to an anonymous person, he tells him that he had a sexual affair with his wife’s friend, Madam Mariem, and returned to kill his wife because she betrayed him. He describes the scene as if he were dreaming, telling the anonymous man:

أخذت موسى الذي استخدمه للتوقيع على الخبز. كانت ترتجف غير قادرة على النهوض من الاعياء و التعب، تبكي وتتأوه و تصيح في وجهي: "هيا افعلها، كرهت الحياة معك"، "هيا افعلها أيها الخائن". جريت نحوها ممسكا بالموسى، احتضنتها، مررت بالموسى في رقبته، انبثقت روحها خارجة، وضعت

رأسها على جسدي و همست في أذني كلمتين، تجمدت، تلطخ المئزر و السكين، هدأت. اصبت بالدوار.
ونمنا جنباً الى جنب على أرضية المطبخ

I took the blade that I used to score the bread. She was trembling, unable to get up from exhaustion and fatigue, crying, moaning, and screaming in my face: “Go on, do it, I have hated you and my life with you,” go on, do it, you traitor” I ran towards her, holding the blade, embraced her, and passed the blade across her neck. Her spirit burst out. I placed her head on my body, and she whispered two words in my ears. I froze. The apron and the knife were stained. She calmed down. I became dizzy. We slept side by side on the kitchen floor (Al-Naas, 2021, p. 201)

This contradiction between Milad’s final act and his true self represents the danger of hegemonic masculinity on vulnerable and subordinated men like Milad. Inhorn (2012) points out that because “hegemonic masculinity is unattainable for so many ordinary men, it may lead to distress for those unable to achieve normative expectations” (43). The failure to fulfill the standards of masculinity leads Milad to be violent in an attempt to assert his masculinity to his society. This failure creates a conflict between his desire to achieve masculine ideals and his critique and protest of them.

Inhorn explains that, in the Middle East, the masculine man is a family patriarch. He exerts his power and authority over his family through coercion and force. She adds that this is true especially when family honor is threatened. Women who shame themselves by licentious behavior shame their families as well. In this sense, “The family patriarch (or his surrogate) must respond swiftly and definitively to defend the family honor, even through *honor killing* of the offending female member. As a hegemonic male, he is supported in his exercise of power and violence by other male relatives” (Emphasis is original, 49). Milad responds according to the societal norm, though he was not sure about the infidelity of his wife. He confesses that he betrayed his wife, but the societal norms punish women only. Thus, hegemonic masculinity does not oppress women but also men by forcing them to act violently toward women and other weak members in society.

Milad’s feelings of failure in the face of societal masculine norms and losing the sense of belonging to a male gender identity lead him to act violently. Younis Al-Fanadi (2022) points out that the bias toward masculinity and against the female entity leads to the crime depicted in the final scene, which reflects a

clear intellectual and psychological disturbance (75). To enhance this sense of intellectual and psychological disturbance, Milad narrates his story in a fragmented way. The loss of chronological order reflects his sense of loss and confusion. The dream-like narrative makes the reader question reality and the effect of rigid gender roles that lead to this extreme violent action. Al-Sheikh (2023) notes that Al-Naas leaves his readers believing that Milad descends into madness (29), especially when he tells his companion at the end of the novel, "هيا لننتدوق الخبز، نضعه على الطاولة و نحضر المربى و الزبد، هل تحتاج الى تونه؟ بعد أن نأكل يمكننا ان نرى زينب، فهي لاتزال نائمة في غرفة النوم" "Let's taste the bread. We will put it on the table and bring jam and butter. Do you need tuna? After we eat, we can see Zaineb, she is still sleeping in the bedroom" (Al-Naas, 2021, p. 202). Until the end, Milad denies that he killed his wife because this action does not belong to his true nature. Al-Naas emphasizes that this act of madness is the result of the pressure of society on men who could not fulfill the rigid gender role.

Bread on Uncle Milad's Table as a Critique of Hegemonic Masculinity

Throughout the novel, Milad's internal conflict becomes more apparent. He rejects the toxic masculinity that society attempts to impose as the only kind of masculinity. His failure to achieve masculine societal norms broadens his identity crisis and sense of fragmentation, creating a contradiction between the idea of masculinity assigned by society and his true self. By presenting Milad's conflict, Al-Naas rejects traditional masculinity and criticizes the societal norms that enforce rigid gender roles. These gender roles perpetuate violence, especially domestic violence. He asserts that it is difficult to challenge these roles. Al-Naas symbolizes society as a bakery and people as dough. The Bakery represents the social and cultural norms that shape and create people, so he chooses baking as a career for his protagonist. Milad asserts this idea by saying, "أن مسألة الخبز تشبه الحياة، حياتي على أقل تقدير" "The issue of bread looks like life, at least my life" (30). Although Milad was clever in making bread, he himself was soft as dough and easily shaped by the societal norms. Men and women in society are soft and easy to shape like dough, while society puts pressure on them to shape them according to its norms and stereotypes. For Al-Naas, there is no escape from the societal norms. Throughout the novel, Milad is shaped by society, leaving him with no choice.

However, Al-Naas attempts to introduce another kind of masculinity to challenge the hegemonic ideology of masculinity. Zaineb tries to help Milad keep his nature as an affectionate man. She tells him:

لم أهتم يوما للرجال الأقوياء، أحببتك لأنك أنت، حنون و لطيف، ولأنك تعد لي البيتزا و تنصت لكل ما أقوله و لأنك تحترمني، لا يهم اذا كنت قويا و قادرا على اللكم و الضرب و الركل، كما لا يهم ان كنت شجاعا كفاية للقتل من أجلي، ما يهم أنني عندما امسك أصبعك الأصغر، اشعر بالسكينة

I never cared for strong men. I loved you because you are you — affectionate and kind — and because you make me pizza and listen to everything I say, and because you respect me. It does not matter if you are strong and capable of punching, hitting, and kicking. Nor does it matter if you are brave enough to kill for me. What matters is that when I hold your little finger, I feel at peace (98)

Zaineb attempts to remind Milad that societal norms about masculinity do not matter. She urges him to keep his gentle nature. Al-Nass highlights that the true strength of masculinity lies in kindness, empathy, and mutual respect, not in violence and killing. He challenges hegemonic masculinity, which has a destructive effect on individuals, especially those who do not conform to it, like Milad.

Throughout the novel, Al-Nass represents the destructive power of rigid societal gender norms. He criticizes hegemonic masculinity that oppresses men like Milad, leading him to a destructive action like killing. He clarifies that the collective pressure of hegemonic masculinity can distort the human nature of men, leading to tragic consequences. He clarifies that hegemonic masculinity consists of a set of values established by men in power to establish inequality between genders and legitimize patriarchal characteristics in society. As hegemonic masculinity is a cultural ideal that reinforces male privilege and power, he urges his readers to ask about the stereotypical gender roles and the consequences of hegemonic masculinity on individuals and society as a whole. Hegemonic masculinity depends on the cultural norms that promote dominant male behaviors that are associated with violence, aggression, and emotional suppression, which Milad fails to accomplish. Throughout Milad's conflict, Al-Nass attempts to deconstruct these behaviors and challenge patriarchal violence and inequality to create a society free from gender oppression for both men and women.

Notes

¹ All translation from Arabic to English is made by the author.

² In Lacanian terms, this relationship between the self and others creates the symbolic order. Hegemonic masculinity is constructed and maintained through the symbolic order, which provides the linguistic, cultural, and social frameworks for understanding and performing masculinity. For Lacan, “masculinity and femininity are not biological essences but are instead *symbolic positions*” (Hook, 2006, p. 61).

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التفاوض على الرجولة: نقد الذكورة المهيمنة في رواية محمد النعاس "خبز على طاولة الخال ميلاد"

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المستخلص:

يتناول هذا البحث الآثار المدمرة للذكورة المهيمنة على الأفراد و المجتمع في رواية محمد النعاس خبز على طاولة الخال ميلاد. ركزت الدراسات الجندرية في مجملها على قمع المرأة في المجتمعات الأبوية مما أدى إلى تهيش الرجال في هذه الدراسات. تجاهلت هذه الدراسات تأثير المجتمع الأبوي على الرجال من حيث أنه يقهر الرجال كما يفعل مع النساء من خلال ما يسمى "الذكورة المهيمنة". الذكورة المهيمنة هو مصطلح صاغته راوين كونل لتبين كيف أن المجتمع الأبوي يتلاعب و يقهر كل من النساء و الرجال الأضعف في المجتمع. فالذكورة المهيمنة تشير إلى مجموعة من الممارسات الاجتماعية و المعايير الثقافية التي وضعها الرجال ذوو النفوذ في المجتمع مشجعين على مجموعة من الصفات مثل السيطرة و العنف و القوة الجسدية. هذه الصفات و المعايير قد تصبح مؤذية للرجال انفسهم حيث قد تؤدي إلى كافة أشكال العنف. بناء على ذلك قدم محمد النعاس في روايته خبز على طاولة الخال ميلاد نقدا للذكورة المهيمنة في المجتمع الليبي من خلال شخصية ميلاد. عانى بطل الرواية، ميلاد، من أزمة هوية حيث فشل في تحقيق معايير الذكورة الجامدة التي وضعها المجتمع مما أدى إلى جعله شخصا عنيفا و دمر حياته في نهاية الرواية.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

الذكورة المهيمنة، راوين كونل، خبز على طاولة الخال ميلاد، العنف، التوقعات الجندرية