

Mary Turner Lane Award

The Mary Turner Lane Award is a student paper competition established in honor of the late Mary Turner Lane, who founded the women's studies program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The competition is open to any currently enrolled female LAU student. The award, consisting of \$500 and a certificate, will go to the best research paper on women/gender studies or original piece of writing such as personal or argumentative essay, (possibly but not necessarily) completed as one of the requirements of a class taken at LAU (literature, language, social sciences, cultural studies, philosophy, education etc.). Below are the two winning papers.

Winning Undergraduate Essay

Revealing the Mask

Berna Ismail

"Feminism is not a word to be defined. It is a feeling that grows deep inside a person". I was once asked in an exam to define feminism and that was my response. I believe that feminism cannot be forced on a person nor can it be taught. Feminism is a feeling that develops inside a person. You cannot force someone to be a feminist. Women have been regarded as inferior to men since the beginning of time. Males dominated females for a long period of time. What is called the "feminist movement" began officially in Europe in the 1960s, but there were many activists years before that date and after it. Women were not allowed to own property. They were deprived of voting rights and of participating in political activities. Women were not given high managerial positions and faced a high gender pay gap. Up until this day, women continue to be deprived of some of the most essential human rights. Although they fought discrimination and gained some freedom and independence, women are still governed by patriarchal norms.

Karl Marx (1848) explained the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat where the rich and the owners of the means of production ruled over those who were poor and did not own any means of production. He claimed that the only way that the inferiors could gain freedom and equality was by rebelling. Jean Paul Sartre (2004) examined the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. Paulo Freire (1970) discussed the relationship between the teacher and the student. All these philosophers believed that the only way to achieve equality was through rebellion and revolution. Nawal El Saadawi discussed the relationship

between males and females: “The norms, values, and moral codes that govern our daily lives discriminate between the two sexes” (1982, p. 115).

Two summers ago, I was buying a gift for my friend from a bookshop and while waiting in line a book grabbed my attention. My hand directly stretched to it, and it was *The Hidden Face of Eve, Women in the Arab World* (El Saadawi, 1982). I suddenly knew that this was how I wanted to start my summer: with a good book. I started reading the book as soon as I got home. It was the first time I had heard of Nawal El Saadawi. She is an Egyptian feminist writer who has spoken out liberally in a society bound by discriminatory norms and values that deprive women of their rights and diminish their role in society. She is also a medical doctor who has treated women both physically and psychologically. She has linked the physical and psychological problems women experience to the society in which they live. She explains that Arab societies are filled with a number of oppressive cultural practices, patriarchal structures, and class and colonial oppression. Furthermore, these practices are passed down through generations where males hold power and females feel shame. Females are discriminated against in all aspects of society, whether politically, economically or socially. *The Hidden Face of Eve* had a great impact on me and helped me look at life with a different perspective, a perspective that I was not quite aware of and did not even know existed. Upon reading *The Hidden Face of Eve*, several chapters stuck in my memory, but one specific chapter had a strong impact

on me. I have therefore decided to reflect on it. It is very important to note that the conditions El Saadawi discusses in her book still apply today, even though the book was published more than 30 years ago. To this day, women still suffer from gender discrimination.

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The chapter “That Very Fine Membrane Called Honor” portrays a real life situation whereby society attributes great significance to this “membrane,” the hymen. According to the English-language dictionary, a hymen is a membrane that surrounds or partially surrounds the external female genital organ. However, according to Arab cultures, a hymen is a

membrane that represents honor. This fine membrane is considered an essential organ that defines females and controls their life. Although the hymen has no bodily function, it is essential for societal survival. For a hymen to be considered intact, it has to rupture during the first sexual intercourse and release blood in order to signify “honor”, proving that the female has not engaged in premarital sex. Its presence signifies honor, but its absence can lead to an honor killing.

The hymen determines if a female is going to be an “honorable” wife or a corpse. Essentially it decides whether a female should be kept alive or executed. The presence of this membrane signifies chastity and purity, whereas the absence of the hymen signifies dishonor and disgrace. The absence of that membrane means that the shame perpetrated by a woman can only be washed away by blood – her blood. Yes, killing

is the solution. The honor of a woman is not her worthiness, her accomplishments, or her potential. The honor of a woman does not lie in her intellect, her personality, or her logic and reasoning. The honor of a woman is only found between her legs. El Saadawi demonstrates that many Arabs only care about this useless membrane. It has neither a bodily function nor any significant biological role. There are many organs in the human body that are essential for survival; however, patriarchal society is mostly, if not completely, concerned about this one piece of flesh. Obviously, the greatest taboo, then, is to engage in premarital sex. This is the chapter that changed my life.

According to El Saadawi, there are several types of hymens, ranging from elastic to delicate to thick. Elastic and delicate hymens might stretch and not bleed during a woman's first intercourse, raising suspicion from the husband, A delicate hymen might have been accidentally broken by non-sexual activity. Our society is unaware of scientifically accepted differing hymens; it is just concerned with its presence. Ignorance and blind societal dictates supersede science and nature in this case. El Saadawi presents real cases whereby many people visited her clinic regarding this issue. For example, a young woman, who had an elastic hymen, was brought to the clinic by her husband who accused her of not being a virgin. Another case was that of a mother who came in late at night worried if the boiling water that fell on her daughter broke her hymen. We

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learn that it is more catastrophic for a female to lose her hymen than to lose any other body part. Also, many fathers came to the clinic requesting a certificate to prove the virginity of their daughters. Husbands and parents sent their daughters and wives to gynecological examinations in order to check their virginity, neglecting the fact that most of these diagnoses might be defective. Moreover, it was not the female who was afraid of not possessing a hymen; it was the husband, the mother or the father. Females are punished because of their biological composition, a matter that is out of their control. If a female is born without a hymen, ignorance will be her executioner (El Saadawi, 1982, p. 28).

This has personally had an impact on me. I refuse to be defined by that useless membrane. I refuse to be labeled according to a useless piece of flesh. Furthermore, I definitely refuse to marry a man who searches for that form of honor within me. I made a vow to myself that I would not be lured by society's shallow and meaningless constraints. I made a vow to myself that I would not marry a man who succumbs to the dictates of society. I made a vow to myself to be free. If people knew what I had done, whether my parents, friends or any outsider, they would probably consider me insane, reckless and shallow and I am sure that they would not accept my decision. They would not understand the reason I did it or what motivated me to do it.

I personally freed myself. I stood up for my rights and for my beliefs. I broke the constraint that society imposed on me. I have pledged myself to break out of this naïve

and shallow society with something that I cannot take back. In fact, I do not want it back. It is not a part of me. I do not need it and I surely do not want it. Actually, it is mine. It is my own possession. It belongs to me solely and I decide what I want to do with it. Yes, I did it. I broke my own hymen. Unfortunately, in the face of such a society, although I have the courage to write this essay without any fear, I have not had the courage to fully free myself yet.

Once, during a class debate, we were asked to define virginity. Thirteen out of fourteen students defined virginity as a condition that only pertains to females. They all said that a virgin is a girl who has not engaged in sexual intercourse. I was the only student who defined virginity differently. I defined it taking into consideration that this state applies to both males and females. If you look the word up in the dictionary, sexual virginity is the state of a person who has never engaged in sexual intercourse ("sexual virginity"). I found out through the class debate that individuals, both males and females, are bound by what this backward patriarchal mentality has imposed on us. This gives credibility to El Saadawi's statement: "Virginity is a strict moral rule which applies to girls alone" (1982, p. 27). It seems that this patriarchal society takes advantage of the societal standards it has imposed on females and uses them for its own benefit.

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In our society, a male's masculinity is measured according to the number of sexual relationships he has experienced. Females are bound by the sexual constraints imposed by society, whereas males are not bound by these constraints. A male's licentious behavior is a determinant of his masculinity while a female's chastity is a determinant of her femininity:

At the root of this anomalous situation lies the fact that sexual experience in the life of a man is a source of pride and a symbol of virility; whereas sexual experience in the life of a woman is a source of shame and a symbol of degradation" (El Saadawi, 1982, p. 31).

The moral values set by society are obviously immoral. According to the dictionary, moral values are the standards of good and evil that govern an individual's behavior and choices ("moral values"). Since these sexual constraints are only imposed on women, they cannot be considered moral according to the standard definition of moral values. We can conclude, then, that the society we live in misconstrues some concepts and defines them according to its own terms.

Gender discrimination has been present for centuries and even millennia. Our society allows men to stay out late at night but sets curfews on women. Women are forbidden to give their nationalities to their children. They are forbidden to travel without their husband's permission. They are forbidden to apply to certain political positions or managerial positions. Men however are allowed to marry up to four wives. They are allowed to beat their wives without being punished by law. Males can lose their

virginity before marriage. Men are allowed to suppress and control women. Females now are aware of this gender discrimination and are fighting for equality and freedom, something that we are all born with. We cannot deny that Arabs are slowly breaking out of these chains, from these backward norms that society has imposed on them since the beginning of time. Nawal El Saadawi pledged: "I'm fighting against the patriarchal, military, capitalist, racist post-modern slave system. I am going to fight for this forever" (El Saadawi, 2011). Society is slowly revealing the hidden face of Eve but more people should join El Saadawi's fight and mine.

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