

# Prison is a Wild Society (Al Sujn Mujtama Barri)

By **Mona Fayyad**

Reviewed by Ranya Al-Abiad

On the 9th of April 1998, Lebanon witnessed a social uprising that was neither expected nor even thought of before. The inmates of the Roumieh prison, one of Beirut's three others, shocked society by bringing to light the reality of their status- a reality much imbedded in violence which engulfed every aspect of the prisoners' life. This uprising, not only turned attention to a once-neglected aspect of the Lebanese environment, it also raised several questions as to where prisons fit in society, and whether they actually figure there at all. This focused on the research of Mona Fayyad on the Beirut prison which came out in February of the following year.

Much influenced by the writings of Foucault, Durkhiem and Besette on the sociology of crime and criminals, Fayyad sought to adapt these ideas to the Lebanese prison system. The prison is seen as an extension of society, probably the clearest, most honest and definitely "wild" aspect of it. She also wanted to discover the reality of the prisoners themselves and the reasons that brought on their imprisonment. Her work thus provides a sociological approach to prisons and their incumbents and presents a successful attempt at depicting the reality of the status of Lebanese prisons, through both figures and narrative.

Fayyad's work is divided into several chapters grouped in two parts portraying an image of the prison unknown to most readers.

In the first part the reader is familiarized with the researcher's field-work. This part is narrative in form and outlines the characteristics of the prison and the prisoners.

The researcher construes the prison as a "totalitarian institution" assigned with a "punishing role" where prisoners are dictated their mode of living (pp.45-76). The prison's authority figures, guards and warden, strive to confine their inmates' acts within the boundaries of their orders. When, for example, a prisoner is seen "smoking or standing in a casual manner, he is quickly reprimanded by the supervising official" (p. 26). In addition, through her many visits to the prison, Fayyad notices the presence of prison rituals that not only extort a prison's individuality, rendering him another number in the records, but also isolate the prison institution and hence remove it from the sphere of civil society (p.47).

In an attempt to relate the prison institution to society, Fayyad asserts that prisons, unlike popular beliefs are part and parcel of society and that prisoners are social and humane beings. Through fifteen personal interviews with a sample taken from the prison population, Fayyad brings out the interviewees as individuals with needs and aspirations. She describes them as "humans not different, that is they resemble us" (p. 100). She recounts that one appears to be "a nice young man, open and talkative" (p. 91), while another is "a very self-confident



narcissist acting as a women charmer" (p.101), and a third "calm, educated and logical" (p. 97). Notwithstanding, Fayyad does not seek to project a clean and humane image of the prisoners for she believes they should "be penalized for their crimes so long as they are guilty" (p. 50), but rather aims to bring out the human aspect of these "forgotten citizens".

In the second part of the book, one gets a tabulated version of the prison's reality. In this section, Fayyad provides data related to the who, why, when, how, and what for of the prisoners. She endeavors to reveal the effect of societal conditions on the behavior of the convict and to draw a correlation between the life led by the inmates prior to their indictment and the reason leading to their criminal offense.

The compilation of this part represents the apex of Fayyad's immense effort to gather first-hand original data and the long hours of data analysis and theorization. She advances a great number of independent variables forming an all-encompassing approach to the topic, sparing no possible combi-

nation of dependent-independent variables in the quest for the profile of the prisoner. This prisoner turns out to be incriminated with theft in the first degree (41 per cent of the cases); they are mostly Sunni Muslims (which is understandable because of the prison's location); they have all suffered residence change; they are mostly young and married and have occupied artisan occupations; finally, 47.8 percent of them are illiterate (pp. 244-5).

After that Fayyad portrays a clearer image of the person in prison, she transports the reader into the realm of gender. In chapter 14 of the book, Fayyad examines the issue of gender and the role that it has on deciding the punishment for the crime. Through her study, Fayyad learns that there exists a certain discrepancy between the status of men and women in prisons at the levels of both the crime committed and the punishment received. Her findings lead her to conclude that "the causes for delinquency are often affected by gender; that this effect can be sought both before and after imprisonment, and that this is related to the social values and the educational backgrounds prevalent in Lebanon" (p. 276).

Throughout the book of Fayyad the question remains, "what is it that leads one to prison and is there a sole reason responsible for opening this door to captivity?" (p. 195). In seeking an answer Fayyad remains faithful to her concern for the individual and for brushing a transparent and honest image of the prison, away from biases and misrepresentation. This work denotes a deep and sound study of one of several Lebanese prisons, and introduces the reader to an unknown, yet very real place. It remains till now the only thorough monograph published on this topic.

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# Discourse of Darkness

**(Hadeeth El-'Atmah)**

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**By Fatna El-Beh**

Reviewed by Isis Nusair

*"A sea of might is women's ability to confront, a sea that has no beginning and no end" (Hadeeth Al-'Atmah, p.3)*

Fatna El-Beh's Hadeeth El-'Atmah is an eloquent and collective testimony to the years that Fatna and her comrades spent in prison during the reign of King Hassan II in Morocco in the 1970s. The book presents a feminist reading of what it means for women to be arrested, tortured, and imprisoned for their political ideas.

The language of the book is full of yearning where the collective and individual, and the personal and political intertwine. The poetic language of the book is full of love for life and stands in stark contradiction to the brutal and torturous reality of Fatna's five years of imprisonment. It is a reflection of the dynamic nature of life in prison, a life full of challenges, hopes and disappointments. It is a story of how those women worked

to improve their prison conditions, how they studied and dreamt of a better future and of the day where they would go back to their villages carrying gifts to the children.

The gendered nature of Fatna's imprisonment is reflected in the way she and her comrades were interrogated. In Fatna's account the feminist is an integral part of the national and vice versa. The two are interwoven to present a testimony as to what life under political and gender oppression means. Fatna and her comrades confronted their captures on more than one level. Their interrogators refused to believe that as women they were arrested for their political ideas. Is it the patriarchal mentality that subordinates women into this second-class position, or were their capturers

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afraid from this new form of feminist resistance?

The process of interrogation was gendered reflecting the strong division of labor along gender lines. Fatna and her comrades were asked by their captives whether they had a male genie. They were later accused of being prostitutes. During the seven-month interrogation period Fatna's identity was erased, and she was treated like a man and was called Rashid. Was this method a way of justifying the interrogator's belief that if these prisoners were "real" women they would not have been here? Or was calling the women political prisoners in masculine names a way to justify that a "true" man would not harm a "weak" woman and he would only interrogate and torture another man?

Fatna narrates in details how she was kidnapped and arbitrarily arrested. She describes how her capturers left her no time to look back and say goodbye to the world. Torture, she adds, has no time; it is constantly present in every shape and form. They are in total control of your life, and you are never left to feel secure. The minute you fall asleep they wake you up leaving you no time to think about yourself. Fatna asserts that they wanted to destroy the self and soul through destroying the body. Their bodies were searched and the interrogators' fingers played with it. "Your body becomes someone else's property, they do what they want with it and they bring it back to you in pieces so that you can pick it up and put it back together. They placed handcuffs on my wrist, you are in our tradition a man and what applies to a man applies to you".

Fatna and her comrades were flogged, electrified under the nails, and crucified in the Moroccan style until they would

lose consciousness. They were slapped, hit, insulted with sexual innuendos, and at times openly threatened to be raped. They were treated as if they were mere numbers, and were prevented from seeing, moving or speaking. Their eyes were covered and they were not allowed to stand up except for going to the bathroom. They were interrogated and tortured for seven months, and towards the end of that period Fatna had come to recognize the voices, features and smells of her interrogators.

For three years Fatna was without a trial. She was sentenced for five years in prison because she wanted a "better future, a better world where human rights are respected and women are not treated as second-class citizens." She was accused of wanting to change the world and the natural role of women and wipe the differences between men and women. This is what one of their men told her: "women should be harem only, their place is at home where they reproduce life, and anything beyond this role is totally abnormal."

The attempt to torture and break the will of Fatna and her comrades produced new forms of resistance and solidarity among the political and non-political prisoners. "Three years of arbitrary arrest, of imprisonment and struggle have taught us a lot about their practices, but have also provided us with tools to resist." Fatna says: "I held my head up in pride for this is all that I have at the moment since I was stripped of everything else... Dream in change is all that is left for those who have no authority". They protested against the sexual harassment of their friend, and sang for the death of Saida Al-Manbahi. "We were stripped of everything except our tears and tongues, so we cried and sang". After twenty days they were trans-

ferred to the prison in Miknas in order to prevent them from being "contaminated" with the disease of solidarity.

The peak of their resistance came when they were moved to the Qunitra prison. There, they had to fight all over again to have some of their demands which were met in the previous prison. They fought for their rights and not for a favor from the prison administration. It was then that they decided to start a hunger strike so that the prison authorities recognize their status as political prisoners. Fatna says: "I realized that I am entering into an experience that has serious consequences. I know though that I am betting on my life in taking this risk... All I wanted was only to defend my citizenship". "This was the start or the end of a road with no end, the road of daily struggle, and the road for continuity and survival have no end. They can no longer ignore a reality that went beyond their old rules and laws. The reality of the life and rights of the political prisoner is now in the open and cannot be easily ignored. Prison laws saw no change in Morocco since 1934. We had to face not only laws that go back to the stone-age, but we had to deal with the absolute mentalities of the officers... There are no rules in prison but strong traditions that know no limit" They held a hunger strike for days and achieved the majority of their demands.

The struggle of Fatna and her comrades is similar to the current struggles in the Arab World for freedom from gender and political oppression and attainment of full rights. Fatna's writing of this powerful book and her insistence that she will turn the world upside down so that the children will know a different world than this one should be a lesson for all of us.