

CHAPTER 4

Findings and Discussions

In this chapter, the roles and images of Muslim women in *The Blood of Flowers* are explored and analyzed in order to find out how Amirrezvani portrays women's positions through the female characters. The discussions that follow concentrate on the idea of wifehood and are based on religious beliefs. As most women in a patriarchal society cannot gain public position, they have limitation of decision making and they lack self-esteem. Throughout the novel, it has been found that Amirrezvani portrays women in many aspects, including not only women's subordination but also women's liberation or resistance. The novel opens by narrating about the female protagonist's struggling life and that she has never given up on her poor fate. Amirrezvani portrays how the main protagonist is unequally treated within a patriarchal society. In addition, she presents the female protagonist liberating herself and resisting patriarchal power in a Muslim patriarchal society.

Islamic culture and patriarchal society likewise affirm the necessity of women remaining at home and being publicly inactive. However, the Holy Book of Islam or the Qur'an points out that men and women are created from one soul and that males and females have the same religious responsibilities. However, some verses show that their positions are not equal. For example, the Qur'an allows a Muslim man to take up to four wives, though it also insists on equal treatment for all. Some Muslim women are ensured monogamous marriage by making it part of a marriage contract, and polygamy is forbidden in states where it is against the law (Qur'an 4:3). It has been found in *The Blood of Flowers* that Muslim women's roles and images are invisible and submissive, women's dress is restricted, women's education is limited, women are treated unfairly with polygamy and are forced to get married, and lastly women are treated as sexual objects.

According to Allan, the term "patriarchy" is used to mean "the male-centered, male identified and male-dominated social structure" (38). Since men and women's

roles are different, the social duties and roles attributed to women are also different. As seen through the main female characters, women are oppressed and exploited under the patriarchal society. Men's positions always are superior, while women are inferior. In the novel, Amirrezvani presents this idea by describing that the choices to engage in professional activities are restricted and they are taken away from women. Also, women have to obey men and their command as the female protagonist's mother says to the male security, "We are the dust beneath your feet" (Amirrezvani 40). Amirrezvani presents the belief that men are superior in all capacities and they are in a higher position where they can control women's lives. Another incident confirms women's inferior position. When the female protagonist thanks her uncle for his permission to help making rugs, she bents and kisses Gostaham's feet before going to tell her mother the good news (Amirrezvani 98). As feet are considered unclean and low, this gesture of respect put women as lower than and submissive to men.

Women are also invisible both inside and outside the home. They are culturally taught to obey and take men's orders. In the novel, Amirrezvani intentionally gives no name to the female protagonist because she might be anyone who is the representative of the female gender and women's situation at the time. Seeman states in her article "Name and Identity" published in 1980 that "Identity, though complex, can be encoded in a name" (136). In other words, the name is the most obvious symbol of identity. That could mean the namelessness of the female protagonist indicates the loss of her identity. She is regarded as being unimportant and invisible in the society. The excerpt below shows how women are invisible and controlled by men,

One afternoon, I was in the courtyard knotting the rug when a servant came by to tell me that Gostaham had returned home with a Dutchman. That was my signal to go upstairs to the secret nook and peek through the white carving. (Amirrezvani 175)

This situation shows that women's places are controlled and they are not able to be in public area or reveal their abilities or skills. In this context, the female protagonist is knotting the rug which is a work that women are not allowed to do in public. Thus, the female protagonist has to go to hide somewhere and listen to her uncle and the guest discuss the price of her rug. Although she sees that her own rug has been sold cheaply by her uncle, she cannot negotiate its price.

In addition, the domestic chores are culturally women's duties. The bread winners or men have professional work outside the house. Women are reserved the roles of housewife and mother because they have no other choices but devoting themselves to their families. They have no opportunities to develop themselves and gain position in the public. As the skilled work belongs to men, women cannot use her ability to do things. In the novel, rugs are mainly men's work. As men create many limitations for women, women cannot disobey men's orders. The female protagonist and her mother help each other clean her uncle's house in preparation for upcoming New Year with other female servants. Meanwhile, men are prohibited from engaging in the housework (Amirrezvani 74-75). This scene shows that women's duties are to work at home and they have been responsible for all house chores such as cleaning, cooking and washing. On the other hand, men culturally act as the heads of the family or bread winners. Men are supported in many things such as in education or in working outside. For examples, the guard who works as the palace's protector is a man, the protagonist's uncle works at Royal Shah's carpet-making workshop the palace (Amirrezvani 40), Fereydoon, is the horse merchant (Amirrezvani 134), even the shopkeepers at the Bazaar are men (Amirrezvani 208). As women are not allowed outside, men do business because it is outside the house. Women cannot even negotiate the price for their goods. In the novel, a woman named Malekeh is a rug seller at the Bazaar. Her husband is sick; thus, she replaces her husband as a rug merchant. Her carpets do not sell until she offers one of them for almost nothing. It hardly covers the costs of the rugs; however, she must sell them because she needs money to support her husband and children (Amirrezvani 208).

The second image of Muslim women shown in the novel is the restriction on women's clothing or the limitation of the way Muslim women dress. The manner of dress of Muslim women has drawn great attention in recent years, with some groups suggesting that restrictions on dress are demeaning or controlling. Throughout the story, every Muslim woman must wear a veil or a hijab both in the household and in public spheres. In addition, *chador* and *picheh* are two types of garments that the writer shows Muslim women being forced to wear according to their religious and social belief. This is because patriarchal system in Muslim society has taken away women's right and choices to dress. In the novel, all female characters must dress with the veil, *chador* and *picheh*. For example, the first-time the female protagonist arrives at Isfahan, the capital

city of Iran, her aunt, Gordiyeh, forces her to wear Hijab. Even though her clothing seems appropriate and proper in her society, she has to change her clothing in order to fit with other people in town. Her aunt also commands that not to leave the house without a *picheh*. It is because women wearing *picheh* implies that they are from a good family (Amirrezvani 50). Every time when her aunt forces her to wear hijab, she feels strange because of the limited eyesight and air. The female protagonist feels uncomfortable wearing *chador* or *picheh*,

The cloth covered my hair and neck, but I did not like how exposed and fleshy my face looked. She shook out a hood and placed it expertly over the top of my head. Even though the hood was white, it was dark and airless inside. Gordiyeh adjusted the hood so that a portion of lace covered my eyes. The world was visible again but only as if looking through the net. ‘That is your *picheh*,’ said Gordiyeh. ‘You should wear it when you are outside.’ (Amirrezvani 51)

The given example shows that Muslim women have to dress restrictedly according to traditional rules and religious beliefs. In an Islamic society, wearing veils and hijabs represents self-fulfilling and modesty. Wearing hijab is done after puberty and it reflects a woman’s personal devotion to God. In the same way, a *chador* is an outer garment worn by women in some parts of the Middle East particularly in Iran and Iraq, to hide the shape or curves of a woman's body (Huda par.1). *Picheh* is like a hat which is used to cover a head but there is a small net opening for the eyes to see through. In general, standards of modesty call for a woman to cover her body, particularly her chest. The Quran, which is considered to be the revealed word of Allah, calls for women to “draw their head-coverings” over their chests (24: 30-31) . Most Muslims interpret this to require head coverings for women; they believe that God has instructed women to wear it as a means of fulfilling his commandment for modesty.

Amirrezvani narrates that Isfahan Great Bazaar is closed to men twice a year, thus, the ladies of the Royal Harem could shop with freedom. All the shopkeeper’s wives and daughters are sent in to run the stores for three days, and all the women, whether buyers or sellers, are allowed to walk around the bazaar without their heavy *chador*. However, the ladies from the Royal Harem have to wait until their horsemen, who have taken them to the bazaar, leave to throw the heavy *chadors* and other wrap-clothes off with merriment and frivolity (Amirrezvani 69). This scene shows that

chadors and other clothes which women have to wear are for them a kind of burden. Although they are allowed to reject their veils at certain time, they have to wait until men give permission to take them off. This infers that men influence the way women dress. The incident shows a Muslim patriarchal belief that has taken women's rights and restrict the way of women's dressing. Moreover, it also means that women cannot own their bodies and show their identities. It is similar to the female protagonist is unnamed in the story.

Women's limitation to get a high education is the third aspect that the researcher attempts to show as women are treated unequally within patriarchal society. Women do not have the same opportunity in education as men because women's roles are to take care of children and to do housework. There is a belief explained in Abeda Sultana's "Patriarchy and Women's Subordination: A Theoretical Analysis," that girls do not have opportunities for education because education is necessary for boys only in Bangladesh (12-13). Thus, patriarchal system creates gender inequality and limitation of getting education between men and women. In the novel, Gostaham speaks to the female protagonist that he never had a son whom he could train to carry on his work, neither of his two daughters ever needed to learn. He also regrets that the female protagonist is not a boy, otherwise, she is the right age to apprentice in the workshop (Amirrezvani 72) . This event shows that the female protagonist and Gostaham's daughters are prohibited to learn men's work. The female protagonist laments,

Had I been a boy, I might be working as one of the apprentices at Gostaham's side, learning all the techniques he knew so well. I thought back with envy to the young knotting I had seen in the workshop on my last visit. They could devote themselves all day to their learning, while I had to work for hours in the kitchen before turning my attention to carpet making. (Amirrezvani 126)

The excerpt shows that she feels frustrated. Women cannot even be willing to learn anything. She realizes that she feels ashamed because it is not a womanly quality to be so eager to learn men's skills (Amirrezvani 97) . However, she does not compromise her traditional roles. Although finally she is allowed to learn knotting the rug by her uncle, she still does domestic chores like other servants in the house. That is why she always thinks that if she was a boy, she might have more time and the right to learn carpet knotting. Also, Amirrezvani attempts to repeat the position of women which

is being deprived of education by describing all the time with the phrase “If I was a boy or if you are a boy.” The female protagonist works secretly for her uncle, but she does not have the right to possess her own work. This can be seen from the speech from Gostaham, her uncle.

You take after me more than my own daughters – you have a natural gift. If you had been a boy, you could have risen through the ranks and learned to make carpets that would be treasured forever and cited by the masters after you. Perhaps, as a sign of recognition from the Shah, you might even have been permitted to inscribe your name on one of your finest works. I know you would have made me proud. As it is, you have made a very good design. (Amirrezvani 267)

The fourth aspect as shown in the novel is that women are treated unfairly in polygamy and are forced to get married. It is believed that marriage is an important stage in a woman’s life. However, it is common that a man is allowed to marry more than one wife and many Muslim women cannot choose their own husband because of Islamic tradition and belief. In the novel, Naheed, a girl from the rich family in Isfahan, is forced to break up with her lover, Iskandar, who is too poor in the eyes of her parents. She is forced to get married with a man whom her parents have chosen, Fereydoon (Amirrezvani 237).

Besides, Marxist perspective also describes clearly about class structure that the dominance of the upper class is more power over the lower. Amirrezvani shows the dominance of the upper class towards others, that the poor are only controlled because they are powerless. The female protagonist is forced by her uncle to sign for the temporary marriage contract or “Sigheh” with a rich man named Fereydoon, a rich horse merchant. This proves that the female protagonist does not have any options but to accept, as her choices and freedoms are very narrowed and depend on her status in the society. However, Fereydoon finally has to get married with the right woman and with the same financial status whose name is Naheed. He keeps the female protagonist as his secret wife. Although he knows that Naheed and the female protagonist are best friends, he does not care. Fereydoon says to her, “A man can marry the way he likes” (Amirrezvani 241-242).

Moreover, the female protagonist does not have any choices although she knows that the marriage is only temporary. The renewal of the marriage contract would depend

on her contract husband. She has no choice but to accept his decision if she still needs to depend on the financial compensation he provides. One thing she needs to do for herself and her mother is only to get money to support her own family. The female protagonist and her mother do not even have their own place to live. They have to stay with her father's cousin as servants. Her virginity is to be sold by her uncle and her aunt. They tell the female protagonist that her virginity won't last forever. Everything in the world is God's own design. The important point is that it will bring her financial benefits she could never claim elsewhere (Amirrezvani 137). At first, she does not dare to refuse because her temporary marriage contract will bring a lot of rug orders to her uncle. It is also the only way in which she can be free in her financial independence. If she does not accept this contract, she has to be work as servants with no paid forever in her uncle's house.

All of these examples show that women are treated unfairly in polygamy and they are forced into marriage. The female protagonist is in the worse situation in her life. Naheed and the female protagonist are treated differently. For example, Naheed has to get married with Fereydoon. Her marriage ceremony is legal and full of guests. She has a big house and many servants. On the other hand, the female protagonist is a poor woman who is a sexual servant, not a legitimate wife who is entitled to being socially recognized and respected. Her duty is to please and make sure that Fereydoon is satisfied. She does not even know her faith in the future because her marriage is only a three-monthly contract. She comes to see Fereydoon only on the days that he wants to have sex with her. These can show that polygamy has become an institution of women discrimination.

Having sex or making love is one of woman's roles to her husband. Patriarchal society always tries to insert their ideology that women are sexual objects. Women are taught to obey men and accept whatever men want them to do. According to the name of the novel, *The Blood of Flowers*, Amirrezvani also hides the underlying meaning. She uses the metaphors "flowers" to represent the female characters in the novel. Every kinds of flowers have different shapes, colors and texture and their origins are from different places. Andrea Frownfelter's "Flower Symbolism as Female Sexual Metaphor" conducted in 2010 claims that flowers have always represented both negative and positive attributes in female sexuality throughout history (21). Also,

“blood” means the sufferings, pain and difficulties in which women face in their life. Hence, Amirrezvani would like to narrate the story about the struggles of women’s lives in Muslim patriarchal society.

In the novel, the female protagonist is the one who are treated differently from other women because of her upbringing and class. She has to struggles at every stage of her life; from being a child to a contract wife. The female protagonist is forced to sign a Sigheh, a marriage contract with a rich man in return for money. Sigheh is only a temporary marriage that has been part of Iranian culture for hundreds of years and is still actively used (Amirrezvani 435). Fereydoon has to wait to remarry with a high-born woman who can bear his heirs. While he is still mourning his first wife, he could have anyone in the land for “the purpose” and the female protagonist is his choice. The novel describes thoroughly how the female protagonist feels about her role as a bought wife,

Diligent though I was in his arms, my body did not soar with pleasure. Where were the raptures everyone had promised? I was even more disappointed than I had been after our first meeting, for nothing had changed. But I did whatever Fereydoon told me to do, mindful that he could say goodbye to me after a few months, and leave my mother and me dependent on the kindness of Gordiyeh and Gostaham. I could not imagine enduring ever again the winter of deprivation we had suffered in my village. Here in Isfahan, we were warm, comfortable and well fed. So, if Fereydoon told me to leave my clothes on or off to go here or there, or to bend over like a dog, I felt I must obey. (Amirrezvani 174-175)

The quotation above shows that the faith of female protagonist depends on her contract husband. It also shows that women’s role is only to please her husband as a sexual slave. The female protagonist has to do it although she is not happy. It is for her mother’s well-being and an exchange with a better life. Fereydoon does not want anything except to have sex with her. Besides, the novel describes that before women will have sex with her husband, they have to take a bath first. It is the way to make herself perfect and to please her husband. It can be observed that the female protagonist is bathed by Fereydoon’s servants every time before Fereydoon reaches the house and has sex with her. She has her hair pulled out of her eyebrows and legs:

When my skin was soft all over, they helped me out of the tub, scrubbed me with soapy cloths, and examined my legs, underarms, and eyebrows for stray hairs. After making sure I would not offend Fereydoon with any forests of growth, Hayadeh washed the hair on my head and anointed it with sweet-smelling oil made of cloves. (Amirrezvani 169)

From these five perspectives fully analyzed, it can be seen that the roles and images of Muslim female characters in the novel *The Blood of Flowers* by Amirrezvani are portrayed and presented as inferior. However, the novel also reveals the situations in which women fight against patriarchy. The next part of analysis will discuss how some female characters in the novel liberate themselves and resist patriarchal power in Muslim patriarchal society based on Radical and Marxist feminism.

Although the portrayal of women has been always shown as submissive, there are some incidents which express women's fight for their rights. According to Feminism, there have been movements in which women began to have questions about their lower position and demanded amelioration in their social status (Freedom 3). This has changed women's attitudes toward discrimination in patriarchal society. This part of the analysis will focus on Radical feminism which deals with the ways to eliminate patriarchal system in which men have power over women in terms of economy, politics, job opportunities, and education (Jane L. Parpart et al. 123). Besides, Marxist feminism focuses on the way that women are submissive in capitalist economy and the right to own property is also discussed.

The Blood of Flower is a good example of literary works which can convince women to understand their rights and make them believe in their abilities to stand against discrimination. The female protagonist is so radical to fight for her social status to gain control of her economy. Her virginity is sold by her uncle and aunt; however, she has never been discouraged on her fate. Hence, women also need to be influenced by their consciousness and education, and start to negotiate for their own rights.

Education is one of the resistant forms which plays an important role in influencing women struggle against discrimination. It can shape people's thought and practice in fighting against a patriarchal system. It can also bring up women's self-esteem and confidence. Nevertheless, girls' education is neglected due to cultural beliefs in many Muslim countries. Women are seen as only relevant in the kitchen and

for procreation. In accordance with the novel *The Blood of Flower*, the female protagonist is the one who is willing to learn and to know about knotting the rugs. She understands that knotting the rug will lead her family to be better than being servants.

After living conditions become harder since the protagonist's father died, the protagonist and her mother move to Isfahan to be servants in her relative's house. After her long hours of kitchen chores are done, she always goes to learn how to knot the rugs with her uncle, Gostaham, who notices her interest in rug making. He says to her that he has never known someone as eager to learn as her (Amirrezvani 97) . It can be concluded that the female protagonist does not accept her destiny. Although she has to work and live as a servant, she still has the hope to learn rug knotting. She expects that rugs will raise her social status. She finds a purpose and happiness in using her hands to create something elegant and desirable. Although Gordiyeh, her aunt, says that she will never be allowed to learn in a workshop full of men nor she cannot do such fine work without an army of specialists, she insists that she still wants to learn, she hopes that one day she will become good enough to help her uncle.

Consciousness-raising is an important tool for Women's Liberation Movement. It can build up women's thoughts to resist the discrimination. In accordance with Hook's *Feminist Is For Everybody* (2000), consciousness- raising emphasizes patriarchy as a system of men having power over women. Women should learn and understand the ways in which they are dominated, victimized and oppressed (7). Hence, the awareness of gender discrimination can lead women to understand the unfairness of their social status and to be conscious of the unfairness forced on them. Only when ones are fully aware of the suppression, ones can fight to gain justice and fairness.

In the novel, each female character has a different consciousness about their lives. Naheed, at the same age as the female protagonist, is glad that her father is concerned with her education. She is the only girl in the novel who is able to read and write. However, her parents force her to break up with her lover, Iskandar, to marry the man whom she does not love, Fereydoon. Naheed believes that her life is destined that she cannot change and that it should not change. On the other hand, the female protagonist has the consciousness and the beliefs of her right to get an equal position in society. Although Amirrezvani might not state explicitly that the protagonist is unhappy about

her subordinate status, her intention to get out of the poverty has been shown strongly in the novel.

Amirrezvani describes the female protagonist as a girl with consciousness in facing every problem. At first, when she is forced to sign a Sigheh, she is reluctant but a Sigheh is one way that she could earn money for her living, “It will bring you financial benefits you could never claim elsewhere” (Amirrezvani 137). Nevertheless, she refuses her aunt and her uncle to continue the third temporary marriage contract with Fereydoon.

“I couldn’t bear it any longer!” I cried, although the pain when I opened my lips was fierce. “How would you feel if every three months you had to worry about whether your husband still wanted you? Or if your best friend threatened your children?” (Amirrezvani 336)

The female protagonist’s consciousness begins to manifest through being discriminated by her aunt, her uncle and also her contract husband. She believes that her life should have dignity rather than being subordinated. She considers that her potential for making rugs is the perfect vehicle to escape the poverty. Hence, she decides to counterfeit the letter to cancel the temporary marriage contract with Fereydoon because it was the only way of leaving the Sigheh (Amirrezvani 337). That is the reason she and her mother are discharged from her uncle’s house and live in difficulties. At that time, it is winter and her mother becomes gravely ill and the protagonist is forced to beg on the streets. Men offer her free food and money in exchange for sex, but she refuses, her first resistance to men’s control and act of self-liberation of sexual inequality.

Feminist thoughts are tools which women use to fight for their rights and social status. According to Hook’s *Feminist Is For Everybody* (2000), Feminism can change people’s life to live equally (10). Thus, Feminist thoughts can urge women to be aware of discrimination. Negotiation is one of the resistant ideas which women employ to act against their oppressors. In the novel *The Blood of Flowers*, there are many situations in which the female protagonist manages to survive in a male dominated society. The female protagonist always shows her enthusiasm to learn how to make carpets. Although she knows that it is not a woman’s place to be keen to learn, “But instead, will you take me to see the royal rug workshop?” says the female protagonist when she asks her uncle to visit his workplace for the first time. It clearly shows that the female

protagonist has some consciousness about what she is capable of doing and learns to negotiation to achieve her goal. She begs her uncle to let her observe his work of art and to return the favor, she will server him coffee as seen in the following.

“May I watch you design Jamileh’s cushions?” I prompted. “I promise you, you won’t even know I’m there. I will fetch you coffee when you are tired and help in any way I can.”

Gostaham’s face softened in to smile, which made his kindly eyes droop even further. “If you are truly interested, you must ask Gordiyeh if you will have time outside of your household duties.” (Amirrezvani 73)

When Fereydoon, the son of a wealthy horse breeder, contacts her uncle with a marriage proposal, Gordiyeh tries to convince everyone that it’s a great deal because they will profit from selling Fereydoon and his family carpets. The female protagonist worries most about her learning. She manages to have her uncle continue teaching her his art whether she is married.

“What about my schooling?” I asked. “Gostaham is still teaching me about carpets.”

For the first time that morning, Gostaham looked pleased, as if I were truly the child of his heart.

“No matter what your mother decides about the marriage, I will continue to instruct you for as long as you want to learn,” he said.

It was as though a light had passed from his heart to mine. (Amirrezvani 142)

The female protagonist always fights and never gives up her desire and intention to make carpets. She works and lives in a society where women typically have no power and influence. Moreover, she is forced to grudgingly make a temporary marriage contract. Signing the temporary marriage contract brings a lot of rug orders to her uncle’s family. When it is time to renew the second Sigheh, the female protagonist negotiates with her aunt about her duties in the house, “I need to be excused from

kitchen duties so I can make a rug” (Amirrezvani 266). Here is she learns to negotiate for herself.

When she finds out that her husband’s new wife is her best friend, Naheed, she refuses a continuation of her third marriage agreement. This leads to Gostaham losing many carpet commissions, and the girl and her mother are finally thrown out of his house after a physical argument. This time she endures the hardship to keep her integrity. She is willing to face all the anticipated living problems as long as she can maintain her dignity. Lastly, she decides to return to her uncle’s house again to ask for charity because her mother is sick and she needs money for medicine and food. Luckily, Gostaham feels guilty and offers her some money to help the protagonist’s mother. At the end of the story, the female protagonist gets a chance to work on carpets with her uncle again. She can gain her economic independence and lives her free life without feeling afraid of an oppressor.

The ways female protagonist liberates herself and resists patriarchal power should be quite rare because the story is set in the 17th century. Although the female protagonist cannot completely eliminate the subordination between men and women, she chooses freedom as to live by her own life with her gifts and talents because she is influenced by her consciousness and education.

In conclusion, patriarchal culture has strongly influenced women’s lives in the novel. While the discrimination of women seems to be a common phenomenon, the female characters in the novel seem to accept all sufferings. However, the female protagonist is unlike other female characters because she fights for her rights. She bravely struggles against the unfair situations and goes against the belief that women should endure all situations in a patriarchal society. She uses education (in this case rug’s making skills), to lift her life, she cultivates consciousness about being subordinated and dare to negotiate for her social status.