Between Faith and Resistance: Intersection of Gender and Religion in *I Am Nujood, Age 10 And Divorced*

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***Abstract*—Power and resistance are deeply intertwined forces shaping gendered experiences within patriarchal structures. When referring to Michel Foucault's ideas, where there is power, there will inevitably be resistance, a concept that becomes especially complex when examined through the lens of gender and religion. In patriarchal societies where religious and cultural norms define and restrict women's roles, resistance is often misread or overlooked. Yet, women navigate these limitations through subtle negotiations, quiet defiance, and courageous confrontations. *I Am Nujood, Age 10 and Divorced* is a powerful memoir that recounts the story of a young Yemeni girl who escapes a forced marriage and fights for her right to divorce at the age of ten. Her bold decision challenges deeply rooted societal norms and family expectations, giving insights of the complex intersections of gender, faith, and resistance in a rigidly patriarchal society. The intersection of gender and faith becomes a space of tension and possibility, where women challenge their prescribed roles not necessarily by rejecting religious frameworks, but by reinterpreting them.**

***Index Terms*—Muslim Women, Female Agency, Islamic Feminism, Gendered Violence.**

I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between gender, religion, and structures of power becomes sharply visible in contexts where patriarchal norms regulate women's bodies, choices, and mobility. Exploring these intersections is crucial for understanding how domination is produced, justified, and contested within specific socio-cultural frameworks. The memoir *I Am Nujood, Age 10 and divorced*, written by Nujood Ali with French journalist Delphine Minoui, stands as a significant autobiographical testimony emerging from Yemen's sociocultural landscape. Originally published in French in 2010 and later translated into more than twenty languages, the text reached a global audience through Linda Coverdale's English translation released by Three Rivers Press. Comprising eleven chapters and sixty-four pages, the memoir narrates the lived reality of Nujood Ali, born in 1998, who became a symbolic figure in the struggle against underage and forced marriage. Her legal victory in April 2008, securing a divorce at the age of ten, and subsequent recognition as one of Glamour magazine's "Women of the Year" later that same year, positioned her both as a national and international emblem of resistance. Minoui, an award-winning journalist known for her extensive reporting on Iran and the Middle East, frames the narrative by foregrounding two pivotal aspects of Yemeni society: the structural inequalities shaping gendered experiences and the complex interplay of tradition, religion, and modernity.

Exploring this narrative raises essential questions about the dynamics of power, agency, and belief. The memoir invites reflection on how religious discourse is mobilised to regulate women's bodies, how patriarchal authority becomes institutionalised within families and legal systems, and how acts of resistance arise even in spaces where autonomy appears impossible. The focus naturally turns to the ways girls like Nujood negotiate fear, coercion, and social expectations while still locating possibilities for self-assertion. It also brings forth the need to examine how faith itself can become a site of possibility rather than oppression, especially when reinterpreted through ethical principles of justice, compassion, and human dignity.

The conceptual grounding for this inquiry draws on Michel Foucault's analysis of power and resistance, which illuminates how social institutions, family, religion, law, shape individuals' lives by producing norms that appear natural and inevitable. Alongside this, Islamic feminist thinkers such as Amina Wadud

and Asma Barlas provide frameworks that distinguish between authentic Islamic ethics and patriarchal interpretations masquerading as religious mandates. The significance of engaging with this memoir lies in its ability to illuminate the complex intersections of gender, faith, and resistance. The narrative does more than recount events; it exposes the mechanisms through which patriarchal authority gains legitimacy, the lived consequences for those most vulnerable, and the forms of courage that emerge in response. It offers an opportunity to rethink assumptions about Muslim women's agency, pushes against simplistic portrayals of victimhood, and reveals the power of testimony as a mode of challenging embedded structures. Through this lens, the memoir becomes a powerful site for analysing how young girls can confront religiously sanctioned norms and reshape the possibilities of freedom and justice within their own cultural and spiritual worlds.

II. CONTEXTUALISING NUJOOD'S NARRATIVE

The story of *I Am Nujood, Age 10 and divorced* cannot be understood without examining the social, cultural, religious, and political environment that shaped Nujood's life. Her personal suffering is deeply connected to the structures surrounding her, family hierarchies, tribal systems, religious interpretations, and the gender norms of Yemeni society. Yemen is known for its strong patriarchal social order, where authority is concentrated in the hands of men, particularly fathers, brothers, and tribal leaders. As Minoui writes in the memoir, "In Yemeni homes…the real law is laid down by fathers and older brothers" (IANAD, 2010:2). This statement reflects the dominance of men in everyday decision-making. Women and girls often have little control over their mobility, education, or marriage choices. For Nujood, this patriarchal authority shaped every part of her life. Her father made the decision to marry her off without considering her age or consent. The memoir reveals the normalisation of male control when the father declares Nujood's marriage to a man "three times older" than her, and she is forced to obey. This situation aligns with the feminist view that patriarchy functions through controlling female bodies and limiting female autonomy (Weedon in Mandell, 1995). Women are expected to follow the decisions of men, even when those decisions harm them.

Tribal structures have a powerful influence in Yemen. The memoir describes how tribal chiefs control important social affairs such as marriage, conflict resolution, and even trade. In such communities, marriage is not just a personal affair, it is tied to social honour, family alliances, and economic stability. Girls from poor families are often married early because they are viewed as economic burdens. This is seen when Nujood's father explains that "neither he nor my mother knew how to read or write," and therefore saw little value in educating their daughters (IANAD, 2010:7). Instead, they considered marriage the most practical option.

Gender norms in this context are deeply unequal. Girls are expected to protect the family's honour, obey male relatives, and remain silent about abuse. Nujood's attempt to resist her marriage was dismissed, showing how girls are denied voice and agency. Yemen's legal system has historically allowed child marriage due to the absence of a fixed minimum age for marriage until recent reforms. Even when laws existed, enforcement was weak because tribal authority often took precedence over formal law. In the memoir, this legal ambiguity allows Nujood's husband to legally marry her despite her being only nine. When she later seeks a divorce, the court becomes a rare place where she can challenge the norms that govern her life. The courtroom becomes a site where personal suffering enters public visibility. Yet, her case is exceptional precisely because the legal system rarely protects girls in similar situations.

Religion plays an important role in Yemeni society, but in many cases, religious teachings are reinterpreted in patriarchal ways to justify practices like child marriage. Nujood's father frequently claims that "the Prophet said it was acceptable for girls of nine to be married." Such statements are examples of selective readings of Islamic history, used without context to support existing cultural practices. Islamic feminist scholars such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas argue that patriarchal societies often misuse religion to control women, even though the core teachings of Islam emphasise justice, compassion, and protection from harm. Wadud (1999) explains that many inequalities arise from male-dominated interpretations, not from the Qur'an itself. In Nujood's case, religion becomes a tool for men to enforce power

rather than a source of protection for a child facing violence.

One of the central issues highlighted in the memoir is the confusion between culture and religion. Child marriage in Yemen is not a religious obligation; it is a cultural practice reinforced by poverty, tribal traditions, and fear of dishonour. The memoir shows how people mix tradition with religious belief, leading to harmful practices. For example, Nujood's in-laws say that a wife must obey her husband without question, even if he abuses her. They make it seem like a religious expectation, although Islam clearly forbids harm and injustice. The inability to distinguish between cultural norms and religious teachings allows patriarchal control to flourish.

Religious authority in Yemen is often controlled by male leaders who interpret religious texts in ways that benefit existing power structures. This adds another layer of difficulty for women and girls seeking justice. Patriarchal control is strongly visible in the concept of *sharaf* (honour). When Nujood seeks divorce, her mother-in-law threatens her saying: "If you divorce your husband, my brothers and cousins will kill me! Sharaf comes first!" (IANAD, 2010:30). Honour is framed as a religious and social value, but it is actually used as a method of policing women's behaviour.

III. READING *I AM NUJOOD, AGE 10 AND DIVORCED* AS A TESTIMONY OF RESISTANCE

Nujood's memoir is more than a personal story; it is a powerful testimony of how a young girl challenges a deeply rooted system of gendered oppression. By narrating her lived experience of child marriage, physical abuse, and emotional trauma, Nujood turns her life into evidence, evidence of how patriarchal societies create unequal power relations and how even a child can resist them. Feminist scholars argue that personal stories can act as political tools because they reveal how larger structures affect individual lives. For example, Liz Stanley (1992) states that women's life writing often becomes a form of "counter-discourse," challenging dominant narratives of silence and obedience. Nujood's narrative performs exactly this function.

One of the strongest themes in the memoir is the destruction of childhood. At only ten years old, Nujood is taken out of school and forced into marriage with a man three times her age. She recalls that she "did not even know what marriage meant," except that it was something adults decided for her. Her lack of understanding highlights the severe power imbalance: decisions about her body, mobility, and future were made entirely by men, her father, brothers, and husband. Forced marriage in the memoir functions as a form of gendered violence. Feminist theory defines gendered violence as acts that reinforce male power and control over women's bodies (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). In Nujood's case, violence begins from the moment she is handed over to her husband. She describes how the wedding night turned into a moment of fear when she was locked in a room, hit, and forced into sexual activities she did not understand. Her testimony; "He came to me every night, and I cried until I couldn't breathe", captures the depth of trauma she faced.

The memoir also shows how violence is legitimised through culture. Nujood's father tells her, "You are married now. It's your duty to obey." Here, obedience becomes the central moral expectation placed on girls. Judith Butler (1990) explains that gender norms operate through repeated instructions: women are taught to be submissive, patient, and silent. For Nujood, these expectations were enforced through threats and physical harm. Even when she tries to run away, her husband drags her back by her hair. The abuse is not just personal, it reflects a system that treats young girls as property.

Another important factor is the idea of family honour. In Yemen's tribal culture, honour is closely tied to a woman's behaviour. If a girl resists or speaks out, the family fears shame. This makes women's suffering invisible because silence is valued more than justice. The memoir shows this when Nujood begs her mother for help, but her mother replies that she cannot do anything because her father would be angry. Silence, therefore, becomes a survival strategy for the adults around her, but a source of danger for the young girl.

The turning point in the memoir, and its strongest example of resistance, happens when Nujood decides to run away to the courthouse in Sana'a. This moment changes the entire meaning of her story. Instead of remaining a victim, she becomes an active agent of her own life.

The memoir describes her courage in simple but powerful words: "I took a taxi alone. I didn't know where the courthouse was, but I told the driver: take me to the judge." Several feminist theorists argue that

agency does not always require full knowledge or power, sometimes it appears in the ability to take a small step despite fear (Mahmood, 2005). Nujood's journey to the courthouse is one such act. The courthouse becomes a symbolic space where patriarchal rules weaken and legal structures offer new possibilities. When she stands in front of the judge and declares, "I want a divorce," she makes a statement that directly challenges her father, husband, and tribal customs. Her words also carry religious significance because, in Islam, divorce is recognised as a right when harm occurs. Nujood's insistence on this right shows that she uses existing religious and legal tools to fight injustice.

Inside the courtroom, she faces legal arguments meant to intimidate her. Her husband tries to convince the judge that she must be returned to him because she is "his wife." Her father tries to justify the marriage by claiming it was necessary for family honour. But the judge listens to Nujood, and public attention starts growing. Journalists gather around her, lawyers volunteer to represent her, and women activists offer protection. This moment shows how resistance sometimes requires a network of supporters. This is "collective agency," where individual struggles become shared social causes (hooks, 2000). The legal process also becomes a moment of visibility. In a society where girls' voices are rarely heard, Nujood becomes a public figure. She is interviewed by newspapers, celebrated internationally, and honoured for her courage. Her story shows that visibility can become a tool of empowerment, especially when it challenges norms that thrive on secrecy and silence.

A powerful aspect of the memoir is how Nujood uses moral and religious arguments to support her resistance. She does not reject Islam; instead, she appeals to its principles of justice and compassion. This reflects what Islamic feminist scholars such as Amina Wadud (1999) and Asma Barlas (2002) argue: the problem is not religion but the ways patriarchal societies interpret it. For example, when asked why she wants a divorce, Nujood simply says, "Because what he did to me is wrong." Her language is moral, not political. She believes that marriage should bring kindness, not pain, an idea supported by Islamic teachings that emphasise mutual respect (Qur'an 30:21). Her resistance is therefore rooted in a moral framework she already understands as a child. This shows that her fight for freedom is not framed as rebellion but as a search for the justice promised to her by religion. Islamic feminist theory calls this a "reinterpretation of faith," where women use spiritual values as tools of empowerment rather than submission.

IV. NEGOTIATED AND EVERYDAY FORMS OF RESISTANCE

Resistance is often imagined as loud, dramatic, and public. Yet in deeply patriarchal societies, especially those shaped by rigid customs, resistance rarely begins with open confrontation. It grows quietly inside homes, in the small decisions women make to protect themselves and one another. In *I Am Nujood, Age 10 and divorced*, this subtle, daily resistance forms the emotional backbone of the narrative. Even when women appear powerless, they create survival strategies that allow them to negotiate with the structures that attempt to confine them. Nujood's story reveals how resistance exists not only in her dramatic courtroom moment, but also in the small acts of courage that take place within families, kitchens, and closed rooms.

Before Nujood ever reaches the courthouse, the women around her practise forms of quiet defiance. They live in a world where men are the formal decision-makers, yet women preserve dignity and strength through emotional support, whispered warnings, and small refusals. These actions may not overturn patriarchal systems, but they allow women to claim their humanity in a world that constantly tries to erase it. Nujood's mother is a powerful example. Although she cannot openly challenge her husband or sons, she expresses resistance through empathy. When Nujood tries to avoid marriage, her mother does not scold her for resisting; instead, she holds her with "eyes full of sadness," signalling emotional solidarity even though she cannot interfere with the men's decision. Emotional resistance becomes a quiet language between women: a look, a sigh, a gesture that says "I see you," even when they cannot speak aloud.

The sisters too practise everyday resilience. They share tasks, comfort one another, and create small pockets of joy in a world that constantly reminds them of their inferior status. Their refusal to internalise the belief that they are less deserving of education, mobility, or happiness is a form of psychological resistance. Even in silence, they challenge the message

that women are meant only to serve or obey. In gender theory, this type of resistance is understood as a way women protect their sense of self within oppressive structures. It is not always loud, but it is steady. It helps women survive long enough to build the confidence and clarity needed for bigger acts of resistance later.

Nujood's journey shows a shift from private resistance, expressed silently, to public resistance, expressed loudly and visibly. Private resistance is the first stage, it gives strength but cannot change the system. Public resistance, on the other hand, confronts power directly. As a child, Nujood's earliest resistance was private. She cries, hides, begs her father to stop the marriage, refuses to smile on her wedding day, and clings to her mother. These may look small, but they are refusals to accept an identity forced upon her. Inside her husband's home, she resists again, not by fighting him physically, which she cannot do, but by mentally refusing to accept his power. She does not surrender to emotional numbness. She continues thinking of her home in Sana'a, of her drawings, of school. Holding onto these memories and dreams is itself resistance, because it preserves a sense of identity that the abuse tries to destroy. This persistence eventually transforms into public resistance when she decides to run away and seek a divorce. The shift shows how private suffering becomes a public cry for justice when the individual reaches their limit. Her journey is a reminder that no public act of resistance is born suddenly, it nurtures itself quietly inside the individual long before it erupts.

In a society where men control law, culture, and religious interpretation, women must craft strategies to survive. These strategies are not signs of weakness but signs of deep intelligence and adaptation. For Nujood, survival begins when she realises that obedience will not protect her. She watches her husband and mother-in-law closely, learning their routines. She observes when the streets are busy, which days the city court is open, and when she might escape unnoticed. She waits for an opportunity rather than acting impulsively, showing remarkable patience and strategic thinking for a ten-year-old. This kind of survival strategy reflects how many women in patriarchal settings must navigate power carefully. Direct confrontation may provoke violence, so they find ways to create hidden spaces of autonomy. Nujood creates hers through memory, imagination, and observation. In her childhood home, her mother also employs survival strategies. She raises her children with tenderness even though she has no authority. She teaches them care, empathy, and cooperation, values that allow them to resist internalising patriarchal beliefs. She does not have the freedom to reject patriarchal rules openly, but she subtly creates an emotional world where her children, especially her daughters, feel worthy of love. In a context where society labels girls as burdens, this act is revolutionary.

Resistance is not only about escaping or fighting back; it is also about preserving one's dignity. Throughout the memoir, Nujood continually negotiates power to maintain her sense of self-worth. Each time she refuses to accept her husband's violence as normal, she asserts her dignity. Each time she imagines a future where she can go to school again, she asserts hope. And each time she tells her story, to the judge, to the press, to the reader, she regains control over her narrative. Within the household, she negotiates with fear. She does not believe her husband's claim that she is worthless or that she deserves punishment. The refusal to accept the abuser's interpretation of her identity is one of the strongest forms of psychological resistance.

Negotiation also appears when she returns home after her divorce. Even though her father is the one who forced her into marriage, she sets boundaries by insisting she will continue school. She states openly that she wants a different life, not just for herself but for her younger sister Haifa. This shows that her resistance has evolved into a protective instinct for others. She refuses to let the cycle continue. Throughout the narrative, women create small but meaningful spaces where they reclaim their agency. These spaces may be emotional, mental, or physical, but they are crucial for survival. These spaces do not dismantle patriarchy, but they prevent patriarchy from destroying the inner lives of women. They allow women to remain human in a world that often treats them as possessions.

V. REREADING FAITH: GENDER, RELIGION, AND POSSIBILITY

Faith occupies a complex place in Nujood's life and in the broader experiences of women situated within patriarchal societies. While religious language is often mobilised to justify control over girls and women, the same religious traditions also contain ethical principles that align with justice, compassion, and

human dignity. *I Am Nujood, Age 10 and divorced* demonstrates how this duality operates within Yemen's socio-cultural context. Although patriarchal actors around her misinterpret religious teachings to validate her forced marriage, Nujood learns to understand faith in a way that uplifts her and affirms her right to freedom. Rather than abandoning religion, she reclaims it as a moral resource that sustains her courage and sharpens her sense of injustice.

This reading challenges a common Western feminist assumption that Muslim women are always oppressed by religion and that meaningful agency requires rejecting faith. Scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty critique such views for homogenising "Third World women" and ignoring the cultural and religious frameworks through which many women interpret their lives. Mahmood's work further complicates the narrative by proposing that agency is not always expressed through open rebellion but often through negotiations within existing norms. In this sense, Nujood's choices cannot be read through secular feminist expectations alone. Her actions emerge from her own moral compass, shaped by community values, her understanding of right and wrong, and a belief that God would not sanction her suffering.

Challenging these Western assumptions requires recognising that Nujood does not simply perform resistance; she defines it on her own terms. Though she is only ten years old, she refuses to accept the passive role assigned to her. Her moment of decision, leaving her husband's house and walking alone to the courthouse, is an act of self-assertion that grows out of her internal sense of dignity. She does not wait to be rescued; she imagines justice for herself and acts upon it. This complicates the stereotype of the "voiceless Muslim girl" often promoted in global media. Even though her small body and fragile voice draw international sympathy, her courage and determination reveal an inner strength rarely acknowledged in external portrayals of Muslim women. As said, people ignore the fact While listening that leads to misinterpretation. (Chamundeshwari 3673). She becomes her own advocate, constructing agency from the limited social and emotional resources available to her.

The misreading of Muslim women as passive also stems from ignoring the everyday strategies through which they navigate oppressive environments. While Nujood experiences violence, she also observes the world around her carefully, learning when to stay silent, when to gather information, and when to act. Her life is not a simple narrative of victimhood but one of negotiation, endurance, and calculated risk. Her decision to approach the courthouse arises from this process of reflection and recognition. It is a reminder that agency can exist as quiet resistance, shaped by cultural norms but not entirely defined by them.

Religion becomes central to this negotiation. Nujood's father uses a selective religious justification to marry her off, echoing Leila Ahmed's argument that patriarchal societies frequently distort religious history to protect male privilege. Yet Nujood instinctively understands that these interpretations contradict Islam's ethical foundations. The Qur'an describes marriage as a bond rooted in mutual care and emotional tranquillity, principles sharply opposed to the violence she experiences. Her understanding that God is compassionate and just becomes the emotional force that propels her towards the judge's chamber. In this moment, she is not rejecting faith but appealing to a deeper moral truth within it.

Scholars of Islamic feminism such as Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud argue that the original Islamic message emphasised equality and moral accountability for both genders, but later patriarchal interpretations narrowed these teachings. Their insights help illuminate Nujood's experience: although she is not formally educated in theology, her moral intuition aligns with the ethical framework they describe. She senses that the injustice she faces is not supported by religion, and this awareness gives her strength. When the judge hears her story and decides in her favour, the courtroom becomes a space where religious ethics and legal authority converge to protect her. This moment symbolises what Fatima Mernissi calls "internal critique", a tradition in which Muslim women challenge patriarchal distortions from within their religious worldview rather than abandoning it entirely. Faith, in Nujood's story, therefore emerges not as a barrier but as a possibility. It encourages her to believe in a life without fear, to imagine herself worthy of kindness, and to trust in the idea of justice. Her struggle demonstrates that change in patriarchal societies does not always come from rejecting tradition; it can also arise from reinterpreting it. By seeking a divorce, she reframes religious values for herself and for the society watching her. Her action opens a window of possibility for other girls who

begin to see that religion need not be used as a tool of oppression. Instead, when understood through its ethical core, it can become a language of liberation. Thus, Nujood's story invites a reconsideration of how faith and agency are understood in Muslim contexts. It resists simplistic binaries between religion and freedom, showing that the two can coexist and reinforce each other. Her courage demonstrates that faith, far from silencing women, can become the ground on which they reclaim their voices and reshape their futures.

VI. CONCLUSION

Gendered oppression takes shape through a complex interaction of tribal authority, cultural expectations, and patriarchal interpretations of religion. These structures define women's roles, limit their bodily autonomy, and naturalise obedience as a moral virtue. When viewed through this intersectional lens, *I Am Nujood, Age 10 and divorced* becomes a narrative that reveals how patriarchal systems maintain power by presenting cultural practices as sacred and unquestionable. Yet, embedded within the same structures are ethical and religious principles that offer possibilities for resistance and reinterpretation.

Understanding the socio-cultural framework of Yemen helps illuminate how authority is normalised through customary law, male guardianship, and tribal markers of honour. The misalignment between these social norms and the ethical foundations of Islam becomes clearer when read through the insights of Islamic feminist thinkers. Their work challenges the assumption that gender inequality is inherent to Islam, emphasising instead how selective interpretations distort the religion's core values of justice, dignity, and compassion. This distinction between religious ethics and patriarchal custom shapes the foundation for examining resistance.

Acts of resistance emerge wherever power is concentrated. In contexts marked by gendered violence and silencing, even the attempt to narrate one's suffering becomes an assertion of agency. Speaking out against injustice, appealing to moral arguments, and reclaiming one's right to safety represent forms of defiance that unsettle patriarchal expectations. These actions reveal that agency is not the exclusive domain of those with social privilege; it can surface through vulnerability, moral clarity, and the courage to demand recognition. Resistance also operates in more understated ways. Women's everyday strategies, emotional resilience, silent refusals, small negotiations for dignity, illustrate how agency adapts to restrictive environments.

A broader re-engagement with faith reveals how religion can function as a source of empowerment rather than constraint. Islamic ethical teachings, when understood outside patriarchal filters, provide language and principles that support justice and reject harm. This perspective complicates Western feminist assumptions that religious women are passive or oppressed by default. Instead, the narrative demonstrates that women may embrace faith as a framework through which they critique unjust practices and assert their moral worth. In this sense, resistance can be expressed through reinterpretation rather than rejection, through reclaiming the compassionate and equitable dimensions of religious tradition.

The narrative demonstrates that the intersection of faith and gender is a dynamic space where power is contested and possibilities for transformation emerge. Religious identity and feminist consciousness need not stand in opposition; they can converge in ways that challenge patriarchal authority and enable new understandings of agency. When faith is reclaimed from the structures that distort it, it becomes a resource for healing, resistance, and the reimagining of women's place within their cultural worlds.

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