

A Reading of Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* against the Background of Imprisonment and Death

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Abstract

The concept of the prison in feminist works is a persistent theme that epitomizes the woman's quest for her undefined zone in a society of double standards that condemns her to a lifetime of paralysis, shame and a dreaded sense of salvation by death. This presentation offers a brief account of a reading of Nawal El Saadawi's prison narrative *Woman at Point zero* and Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*. The multitudiness of meanings and manifestations of imprisonment and the unescapable sense of freedom and hope in death is the main focus of this study. The prison, both physical and psychological, in these works is not a motif or a symbol or a theme, but a life, in the literal sense of living ; that is made to be synonymous to a prison.

Introduction

« Unity of time, place and action works once again to pull the spectator into a place of pain that is utterly particular to the players but also universal » (Miriam Cooke cited in El Saadawi, VIII)

Perhaps the idea of a paper that attempts to find common grounds in El Saadawi's prison narrative and Plath's confessional poetry seems very unphathomable due to the immense number of differences that can be underlined if the two writers are compared. El Saadawi was born and raised in a small village near Cairo in the thirties of the twentieth century where she experienced the diminishing acts practised on women by their society. She witnessed the cilencing, the sexual abuse and the beating of women as a natural part of the Egyptian woman's life. El Saadawi was trained as a doctor and a

psychiatrist and this allowed her to speak to women who went through traumatic events in their lives, often caused by male dominance and sexual prejudice.

The writing of *Woman at Point Zero* was inspired by a real life situation she had while working as a psychological consultant in Al Qanatir prison of women, one of the most infamous prisons in the collective memory of Egyptians. There, she encountered a death row prisoner named Firdaus who was spending her last days in the prison before execution and listened to her tragic story which later on was translated with El Saadawi's pen into a literary sensation and an Arab feminist manifesto .

The story of the woman who struggles to survive and prove herself is still told half way across the planet. Sylvia Plath was born in 1932 in Boston, exactly a year after El Saadawi's birth. She lost her father as a child in an early confrontation with the cruelty of death and departure. She was a brilliant student with a love for words and was an enthusiastic reader. Her chronic depression led her to a series of suicide attempts and she eventually took her life when she was only 30 years old during one of her most productive and creative periods as a writer. Her suicide was instantly linked to her husband Ted Hughes, a famous poet himself, who was unfaithful and abusive.

Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* is the namesake for a collection of poems that was published posthumously in 1965 after 2 years of her death by suicide. The cronicly depressed artist wrote her final collection of poems at a time when she was separated from her unloyal husband taking care of her 1 and 2 year old often sick children on her own during one of the coldest winters in recorded history, all while dealing with dire financial and psychological problems. Plath is credited for advancing the genre of confessional poetry and all of her body of work in rooted in her life as a child, a lover, an orphan, a wife and a mother.

This paper is a reading into the affinities shared by two female writers who belong to two very different parts of the world. The intention is not to prove the exact similarities of women's experiences around the world ;which is a futile probe given the divisiveness and ambivalence endemic in feminism and its many interpretations. A careful reading of El Saadawi's and Plath's biographies and their writings uncovers a conspicuous common concern in the universal feminist concepts of prison, death and emancipation.

Feminism as a Global Phenomenon :

It is a general tendency of Westerners to assume that the Arab women are among the most oppressed if not the most oppressed of their gender all over the world. It is unfair to blame them for such an assumption given the fact that most of the female Arab writers and thinkers with ideas that challenge the male institution are deemed threatening to the ever revered moralities of their conservative societies. In his 2016 article Arab Feminism Writing from Foundation to the Problem of Term Amer Rida maintains a view that resists the patriarchal restraints of women's self expression and contends that Arab feminist literature is channelled towards washing away the shame and the negative image of the suspect. The Arab woman , much like any other woman in the world, endures a global state of shaming that starts from her appearance, to her social status, her education, and extends to her desires and creative tendencies. Rida also uses the terms « legitimacy of writing »(4), in reference to the patriarchal condemnation of feminist writing as worthless and uncomparable to men's writing abilities ; the question here is : Is writing a biologically-bound ability ? A possible answer could be that women's writings are not an empty cry bereft of artistic value and logic but a necessary counter-creative current that maintains a ballance in literature and saves this realm from bearing a paralysing handicap.

The concepts entailed by conventional gender-based literary classification build a thick and tall wall between male and female literary and artistic sensibilities . In literary criticism, one can delineate three tendencies dealing with this classification. The first places men's and women's literatures as absolute counterparts that should neither coexist, nor help define each other. The second leans towards the pendulum at the other end of the argument where a universal common human experience, regardless of gender differences, is called for. The third , diplomatic, stance exaggerates the possibility for a shared peaceful ground were women and men represent their respective genders with their unique features without the need to enter the futile argument of who dominates who and who should be regarded better than who, or who is more creative than who. The mercurial nature of feminist literature is overbearing and all the attempts to define it fail to circumscribe its majestic dimensions.

In Jessica G. Rabin's compelling book *Surviving the Crossing*, she explains, quoting Tery Eagleton, how binarism is deeply rooted in the Western thought stating that «for all the binary oppositions which post-structuralism sought to undo, the hierarchical opposition between men and women was perhaps the most virulent» (Rabin,13). It is ;then , safe to say that the debate of feminist literature and its position in the male-dominated literary spectrum is also a debate of the binaries that form one of the main premises of the contemporary western intellectual framework. This binarism now has its roots in poststructuralism where a concept or an idea is in conflict within itself, much less with its opposite. Based on binary oppositions, defining women's literature by its male counterpart presents an underpinning to the politics of sexist hierarchy, in much the same manner good is defined by evil. Latifa Al Zayat, hailed as one of the first arab feminist writers and critics, explains that she refuses giving gendered names to female and male writings although they write in discernably different manners.(Rida,7)

Firdaus and Sylvia

Nawal Saadawi's work is a revolution of a pen and a rebellion of a woman . An arab feminist is a burdened feminist ; this is not to say that a Western feminist's struggle is a spring walk, but to emphasise the predicament of the arab's. Saadawi's prison narrative *Woman at Point Zero* marks a very interesting use of her real life experience as a psychiatrist to write a brilliant narrative about the life of Ferdaus who descends into prostitution and faces the consequences of her unconventional life in a patriarchal society. The paralyzed prisoner in her cell, excitingly awaiting for her own execution, is as much of a prisoner in a governmental jail for killing a man as she was a prisoner under her own skin selling her body to random men to survive and escape the entrapment of another man, her much older husband with a deformed face. The protagonist's life is a small bubble with no corners for hiding and with little air to stay alive. In this sense death becomes a gateway to absolute freedom of the body and the soul.

El Saadaawi,who is also the narrator of the novel, speaks of her own loss of self worth and dismay at the society's indifference of her tiny and insignificant existence. Despite her physical freedom, she feels that Ferdaus the death row prisoner is better than her. She wrote:« It looked to me as though this woman who had killed a human being, and

was shortly to be killed herself, was a much better person than I. I was nothing but a small insect crawling upon the land amidst millions of other insects.»(El Saadawi,3). Nawal is elated when Ferdaus finally agrees to see her only a few hours before the execution. The free and well educated doctor can barely contain herself when she looks into the cold and steady eyes of the condemned killer « It was as though I died the moment her eyes looked into mine»(7)

Ferdaus's personality is a captivating mixture of anger and strength. She says she hates all men although she does not know them all. She is proud and finally feels that she is superior in her prison cell « All my life I have been searching for something that would fill me with pride, make me feel superior to everyone else, including kings, princes and rulers » (9)

Ferdaus confesses her deepest secrets to Nawal because she has nothing to lose and because she is convinced that by being honest she liberates herself from the fear of judgements. She describes herself as a low class woman with a middle class education and an upper class prostitute, in a high note of self-knowledge; she says « Only me hair, my make up and my shoes were upper class. With my secondary school certificate and suppressed desires I belong to the middle class. By birth I was lower class. »(11) Ferdaus is not ashamed of her prostitution as much as she is ashamed of being an oppressed pure woman.

When Firdaus kills a man she is neither afraid, nor does she regret committing a crime. She does not think that she is a killer and says she would kill that man again if she is given a second chance. The freedom and happiness she feels is more fulfilling than anything else in her life« If I go out once again to the life which is yours I will never stop killing » (111). Ferdaus waits for the authorities to hang her without the slightest trace of fear and describes death as a journey of triumph« This journey to an unknown destination, to a place unknown to all those who live on Earth, be they king, or prince or ruler, fills me with pride »(111)

Moving from El Saadawi's Woman at Point zero to Plath's Ariel in a discussion of release and death is as smooth as Sylvia's early morning ride on her favourite horse. The poem is full of movement and irreproachable imagery that accompanies us along a daybreak horse ride into the shadows of what is left of the darkness of night towards the « red Eye » or the sun. The narrator of the poem describes this ride as a

liberating experience, almost an escape that allows her to « unpeel » the skin of her old shackled self and expose the nakedness of her free self
White

Godiva, I unpeel

Dead hands, dead stringencies. (Hughes,239)

Although the poem is embellished with Plath's beautifully arranged words, it seems as though the narrator is courting death along a suicidal path of destruction. In his book Bloom's Major Poets, Bloom argues that :

Since morning is the start of day, the poem ends, then, with a beginning and the implication of further movement toward more and more brightness. At the same time, however, the poem ends on what can be seen as a path of suicidal destruction, with the assumption that the narrator will be annihilated by the sun. It is not an accident that “morning” (the last word of the poem) sounds exactly the same as “mourning”—reinforcing the poem's duality and promoting the idea that something must die in order for something new to be born.
(58)

Whether Ariel is a poem about a breezy ride, or death or rebirth, the notes of destruction and threat are unescapable. In the closing verses of Ariel Plath Wrote:

And I,
am the arrow,
the dew that flies
suicidal, at one with the drive
into the red
Eye, the cauldron of morning (Hughes,239)

The cauldron is the image of the sun boiling with a heat that can bring doom or warmth. The end of the poem is a beginning of a new day or the end of the fragile existence of the rider who stands helplessly in the face of the mighty sun. The narrator is no longer in the shadows of living and looks at her path of annihilation with delight. She is naked and ready to leave the darkness and dive into the light. The darkness is a symbol of her life and the light is the salvation she seeks in death. In

real life, Plath killed herself in the early hours of morning giving her soul away to the cauldron.

Conclusion

Plath and El Saadawi's heroines gladly plunged to their own deaths. The act of death-bound emancipation is a feminist triumph where both women follow a path of destruction of their choice instead of allowing the hostile world to defeat them. Ariel and Woman at Point Zero immortalize a woman's valorous declaration that she would rather be dead than held captive.

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