

MEANDERING BETWEEN SELF-ACTUALIZATION AND SELF-SABOTAGE IN EL SAADAWI'S WOMAN AT POINT ZERO AND ANZIA YEZIERSKA'S BREAD GIVERS

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Abstract: The fictional protagonists Firdaus and Sarah in El Saadawi and Yeziarska's novels respectively struggle against the oppression they are exposed to by patriarchy and institutionalized religion. The paper argues that though they manage to free themselves and assert the potentials of their femininity, they meander between self-actualization and self-sabotaging. In El Saadawi's novel, Firdaus realizes her ends of self-independence, self-actualization, freedom and accountability through the power of reading (knowledge), the power of strong will, and the power of work. Her decision to kill her pimp, however, uncovers a self-sabotaging behavior for which she is sentenced to death. In Yeziarska's novel, Sarah realizes material independence and fulfills her life ambitions and dreams. Yet, her preference of the company of man and sometimes his supremacy to independence unveils a self-sabotaging behavior.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Religion, Self-actualization, Self-sabotaging.

Introduction: This paper explores the images of women in two different novels, Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1975) and Anzia Yeziarska's *Bread Givers* (1925). It relates the oppression of the protagonists Firdaus and Sara to patriarchy and institutionalized religion. Though both women attain freedom, autonomy and social mobility through work and education, the paper argues that Sara and Firdaus meander between self-actualization and self-sabotage. The paper likewise answers this set of generic and specific questions: What social identity do Firdaus and Sarah assume? How can religion contribute to the subordination and exploitation of women? How can women free themselves from man supremacy? Are the protagonists' rebellious actions justified and workable? The novels are analyzed from the perspective of Marxist feminism which asserts that women are doubly oppressed by the virtues of their gender and social class. An overview of the plot of each novel is provided to help readers understand the arguments the paper makes.

Even though these two novels are not written in the same period, they represent the works of two feminist activists belonging to two different waves of feminism. El Saadawi's work meets the characteristics of the second wave feminism, whereas Yeziarska's work meets those of the first wave feminism. However, both works address such common themes and motifs as authoritative fathers, gender-based job segregation, gender-based wage differences and women's struggle for equality, autonomy and justice.

Plot Overviews: El Saadawi's novel revolves around Firdaus, a woman condemned to death for killing a pimp. It retells Firdaus' childhood with her parents, the act of incest committed against her by her uncle, how she became a prostitute and finally her rationale for killing.

Yeziarska's novel, however, is about Sara Smolinsky, an immigrant child growing up with her parents and 3 sisters in New York. She is steadfast and determined to help ease the family's poverty and hunger, so she collects coal ashes for heat and sells mackerel. As she grows up, Sara watches her authoritative religious father as he marries off each of her sisters to wealthy men in order to ensure a large dowry. Her sisters' dreams for a marriage of love are turn to be unreachable because they dutifully comply with their father's will. Unlike her sisters, Sara pursues her education at the local night school and attends a college, where she earns a degree in education. This qualifies her to teach for an elementary school in New York and consequently realize the American dream.

Questioning Patriarchal Discourse: Judith Grant (1993) identified the 'category woman' as a major component in founding contemporary feminist theories. This category is derived from an early radical feminist notion that women are oppressed not only by virtue of their class or race, but also by the fact of their womanhood. Grant mentions "[t]he fact that they were treated collectively as inferior group by the Left justified the emerging view that the connections between them as women outweighed all others" (20). The protagonists in El Saadawi and Yeziarska's novels are oppressed for their gender. Firdaus, for instance, turns into a prostitute because she was emotionally and physically oppressed. This could be one way to cope with male supremacy and assigned gender roles and rebel against the oppression of her womanhood which was practiced by family as well as her uncle, who used to rape her. For Joreen (1969), a bitch has a positive meaning, "a woman should be proud to declare that she is a bitch because bitch is beautiful....Bitches don't particularly like passive people. ...women are trained to be passive

and have learned to act that way even when they are not" (5-7).

In a patriarchal society, women are perceived as biologically and socially inferior beings to justify their subordination to men and denial of their rights and freedoms. The protagonists feel they are socially discriminated against, silenced and oppressed by the virtues of their low social class and biology. This accounts for their loss of identity and alienation from humanity despite their endeavors to achieve social acceptance.

In the course of her opposition to feminist biocriticism which "places the body at the center of a search for female identity" (252), Showalter alerts that the biological difference can be used as a pretext to justify the domination of one sex over the other. Socially constructed roles often thwart the potentials of women and deny their rights of education and work which represent the passages women can take to the worlds of freedom and autonomy.

Understanding the inner selves of the two feminist protagonists and the anti-feminist protagonists is necessary. If we consider how Nona Lyons (1988) explores the term of self, we notice that she divided self into either "connected self" [nonautonomous] and "separate/objective self" [autonomous] (55). She, among others, assumes that males are supposed to be autonomous, while females are to remain connected or "nonautonomous". Sarah and Firdaus are accordingly autonomous-driven since their acts and choices indicate they no longer accepted being connected with societal stereotypes for their destructive effects. Guss Teicholz (1988) comments on a self that is similar to that of Sarah's father and Firdaus's uncle. She says "individuals who were unable to develop ambitions and goals would indeed suffer a gap or a deficit in the self; or...would be unable to evolve attainable ambitions" (36). This could be an excellent interpretation to what occurred to Sarah's father after his arrival to America and Firdaus's uncle, who depended on his kinsfolk in making his living rather than having his own job; they are unable to bring together religion and secularity. They had no reason, no ambitions, and no real understanding of religion. Sarah's father couldn't value the American dream, so he tried to cover this "emptiness" with the power of institutionalized religion. This sort of self, according to Teicholz, leads him to a unique sense of "I-ness" (116), thus letting him oftentimes think of pride as more dominant than reason.

Though women in a patriarchal society are exposed to material, physical and sexual exploitation, they respond differently. El Saadawi's novel sheds light on the miserable life of Firdaus who is abused sexually by her family and friends and legally by the court

which does not take her psychological state as a prostitute and a victim of patriarchy into account when the death penalty is pronounced. As most Egyptian women in the 1970s, Firdaus was not allowed to see her fiancé because it went against the traditions of her family and society. She also had to accept her suitor just because her guardian or parent had agreed on him. She had been beaten up by her husband with a pair of shoes, a form of violence that caused her physical as well as psychological harm.

Similarly, Yeziarska depicts women as helpless victims and scapegoats of the Jewish patriarchal traditions and norms which exploit them materially. Smolinsk utilizes religion for his own purposes and obliges his daughters to earn a living. He constantly tells off his wife for attempting to make decisions and insists that all of his daughters' wages come to his pocket. As he intends to establish a business of his own, he denies his daughters' right to choose their marriage partners whom he greedily expects to help him financially.

Gender-based oppression and violence are not necessarily enacted upon women by their husbands, fathers or brothers. Rather, it is sometimes enacted by other women such as mothers and sisters. Woman- woman oppression is a common theme in the works of El Saadawi and Yeziarska. Joreen claims that women are "oppressed by other women as much if not more than by men and their hatred for them is usually greater" (7). In one incident, a landlady refuses to rent Sara a room because she is a woman. Similarly, Firdaus is vulnerable to the hatred and cruelty of her uncle's wife who used to approve the violence and abuse enacted upon Firdaus by Sheikh Mahmoud. In Joreen's perception, this raised the question of "what is it that unites women under the same banner?" (7-8) Definitely, women in both texts do not show any sort of unity, thus enforcing and maintaining male supremacy.

Questioning Religious Discourse: Institutionalized religion rationalizes the stereotypes about the mental and emotional inferiority of women. El Saadawi's novel highlights the issue of religious hypocrisy in the Arab society, where men manipulate religion to enslave women whom they warn that Allah will banish them if they disobey the orders of their fathers and husbands, do not veil their faces or castrate themselves from the public life. The religious terror and hypocrisy some Arab and Muslim women endure is comparable to that of Puritanism which ostracized or killed women for pardonable crimes when committed by their male counterparts. Firdaus sarcastically responds by revealing that her father knew very few things. ... how to sell a buffalo poisoned by his enemy before it died, how to

exchange his virgin daughter for a dowry when there was still time, how to be quicker than his neighbor in stealing from the fields once the crops were ripe, ..., I would see him walking with the other men like himself as they commented on the Friday sermon, on how convincing and eloquent the *imam* had been to a degree that he had surpassed the unsurpassable. For was it not verily true that stealing was a sin, and killing was a sin, and defaming the honor of a woman was a sin (12).

What Firdaus' father considers to be a sin contradicts what he does in his daily life since he used to cheat people, steal their fields, view and treat his daughter as a commodity or property, beat and despise his wife. The narrator also draws attention to the hypocrisy of the *imam*, a clergyman, who likens the love of the ruler to the love of Allah during prayers, "that love of the ruler and love of Allah were one and indivisible". (12) Such a comparison introduces man as a divine being to whom women should submit and worship. In another example of religious hypocrisy, Firdaus recollects the story of her marriage to Sheikh Mahmoud, who prays five times a day in the mosque but hits her with his shoes. When she complains to her uncle, he emphatically says that "all husbands beat their wives" (44) as part of their family obligations. Undoubtedly, both Sheikh Mahmoud and her uncle are hypocrites because Islam demands gentle and equal treatment of women.

In like manner, Yeziarska's novel perceives religion as a tool to exploit women and implant certain myths in their minds. Sarah mentions that her father preached that "the prayers of his daughters did not count because God did not listen to women. Heaven and the next world were only for men. Women could get into Heaven because they were wives and daughters of men" (9). He further recites from Torah that "a man has a right to hate an old maid for no other reason but because no man had her, so no man wants her." (96) These excerpts suggest that religion discriminates against women and denies their equal rights to men. It further entails the phallogocentric religious and social ideologies reinforce man's authority over women. Although Judaism preaches against greediness which is notably considered one of the great sins that has plagued people, Smolinsky greedily collects the few dollars his daughters earn through their work. This religious hypocrisy is eloquently described by Sarah who mentions that There was father with a clear head from his dreams of the Holy Torah, and he'd begin to preach to each and every one of us our different sins that would land us in hell. ... They couldn't stand father's preaching any more than I, but they could suffer to listen to him, like dutiful children who honor and obey and respect their father, whether they like him or not. If they ever

had times when they hated Father, they were too frightened of themselves to confess their hate (65).

Although Sarah's father adheres to Judaism, he never perceives its teachings correctly. Instead of nursing his dying wife, he runs to the synagogue where he believes he can help her more by praying than by staying with her. This superficial adherence to religion provides men with an opportunity to gain more respect and power and be exempted from punishment. Despite the physical harm Smolinsky causes to the landlady whom he severely hits, he is not punished owing to his reputation as a pious man. Such manipulations of Islam and Judaism significantly result in the distortion of the image of religion as a conciliatory and impartial social apparatus that cultivates equality and mutual respect among genders, nations and culture. As a result, protagonists Firdaus and Sarah neither value religions nor ever think of them as good solutions to their daily life matters. They as well challenge the religious teachings their parents and communities promoted.

Quest of Self Actualization and Self-Empowerment: Linda Alcoff (1988) perceives gendered identity as positionality sees women's lives as a necessary point of departure for feminism, but her notion was built on a discursive position rather than an empirical one. Hence, she calls for an uneasy combination of a postmodern and a humanist subjectivity. In other words, how can a subject "choose" the discursive positions she occupies:

The concept of positionality allows for a determinate though fluid identity of woman that doesn't fall into essentialism...being a "woman" is to take up a position within a moving ... context and to be able to choose what we make of this position and how we alter this context (435).

Since 'subjectivity' is an important pillar of Marxist feminism, it is clear that protagonists' decisions are taken carefully after long thoughts because they had to be responsible for their choices. This will enable them to take a 'position' in their society. Firdaus's and Sarah's choices lead to positions, which could be both interpreted as positive and negative. Still, both have to take responsibility for making these choices.

Exploitation plays a great role in empowering protagonists to be decision makers. Reb Smolinsky used to take all the wages earned by his daughters while he stays at home reading some religious books. Also, Firdaus's uncle took all the dowry of Firdaus without giving her any single dime.

Marxists believe that since the human being is the one who creates the labor, he should be able to have the power over it. Because the two protagonists play the role of providers, they should not surrender their powers and desires for someone else's sake.

Firdaus manages to speak and respond at the end of the narrative as she announces her refusal to live in a hypocrite masculine society and makes her choice to kills and be executed. Firdaus is portrayed as a victim of gendered discrimination which estranges her from her family and society and drives her to be a prostitute. Like any other Egyptian girl, nobody asked her whether she wants to get her clitoris removed and whether she wants to marry Sheikh Mahmoud who is as old as her father. Shockingly, she recognizes that she does not even know which fruit she prefers because she never thought about what she likes and dislikes. When Bayoumi asks her whether she prefers oranges or tangerines, she replies "no one has asked me before whether I preferred oranges or tangerines. My father never bought us fruit. My uncle and my husband used to buy it without asking me what preferred" (47). These conditions evoke her quest of self actualization and self empowerment which she expresses in her questions "Who was I? Who was my father? Was I going to spend my life sweeping the dung out from under the animals?" (16). These questions instill in her a passion for making decisions. Her decision to be a prostitute proves to be very empowering as she learns to choose her own apartment, clothing and the men with whom she sleeps.

As an educated woman, she rejects the patriarchal belief that a woman without a man is "less than nothing" (205). She declines the marriage proposal of Max Goldstein because he denies her the right to express herself. Her fascination with the American culture encourages her to emigrate to the United States where "it's a new life now. In America, women do not need men to boss them" (137). In a conversation with her mother, she emphatically discloses that "I can't respect a man who lives on the

blood of his wife and children. If you had any sense, you would arrest him [her father] for not supporting you." (130). Repelled by her observations of the male-dominated family, she sets out to forge a new life for herself and make a complete break with the past. Immigration to America enables her to forget "olden times. Thank God, I'm living in America! You made the lives of the other children! I'm going to make my own life!" (138).

The decisions the protagonists make in the two works equip them with unlimited powers. Their pursuit of knowledge empowers them to demand equal rights for women and relate the dependence and docility of traditional women to illiteracy. Through reading, Firdaus realizes that there is another world deserving exploration than the 'ignorant' world of her father which engenders gender inequalities. Likewise, Sara spends many of her decisive years running after her education despite the familial obligations and life complexities. She excels at school and achieves her lifelong dreams.

Conclusion: Protagonists in El Saadawi and Yeziarska's novels engage in struggle against the oppression they are exposed to by patriarchy and institutionalized religion. In El Saadawi's novel, Firdaus realizes her ends of self-independence, self-actualization, freedom and accountability through the power of reading (knowledge), the power of strong will, and the power of work. Her decision to kill her pimp, however, uncovers a self-sabotaging behavior for which she is sentenced to death. In Yeziarska's novel, Sarah realizes material independence and fulfills her life ambitions and dreams. Yet, her preference of the company of man and sometimes his supremacy to independence unveils a self-sabotaging behavior.

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