



Women Empowerment in the Realms of Institutionalized Religion and Patriarchy: El Saadawi's *Firdaus* and Yeziarska's *Sara* as Examples

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Abstract

This paper explains how the two protagonists, *Firdaus* and *Sara*, successfully paved their own ways in search of self-liberation despite the authoritarian patriarchy and institutionalized religions that plagued them. El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and Yeziarska's *Bread Givers* represent the fruitful struggle these protagonists experienced as they come to forge an identity and be themselves. The paper argues that the protagonists manage to free themselves, establish their own spiritual homes at their own homes and assert the potentials of their femininity despite their endings. Empowered by the powers of reading, strong will and meticulous work, the protagonists were able to realize their own material independence and achieve their lifelong ambitions. However, through *Firdaus*' and *Sara*'s journeys of breaking their silence, they were subject to different patterns of self-annihilation. While *Firdaus* was sentenced to death for killing a pimp, *Sara* embraced living under the hegemony of an authoritarian husband.

Keywords: Women empowerment, authoritarian patriarchy, institutionalized and/or gendered religion, spiritual feminist homes

1. Introduction

This paper examines two models of women who belong to two different social, religious and cultural backgrounds in search of their own self-actualization, yet resort to self-annihilating procedures to doing so. This study therefore delves into two buldingromans, long narratives that revolve around the life stages of the protagonists from early childhood to maturity, Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1975) and Anzia Yeziarska's *Bread Givers* (1925). They also relate the oppression of the protagonists, *Firdaus* and *Sara*, to patriarchy and institutionalized religion. The paper argues that the protagonists manage to free themselves and establish their spiritual homes of success and independence. The novels are analyzed from some different perspective of feminism which asserts that women are doubly-oppressed by the virtues of their gender and social class.

1.1 About the Novels

Although not written in the same period, the novels in question represent literary works for two major authors who write from a feminist perspective yet belong to two different waves of feminism. El Saadawi's work meets the characteristics of the second wave feminism, whereas Yeziarska's work meets the first wave. However, both works have many commonalities, especially in terms of authoritarian fathers, institutionalized religion and women's struggle for equality and autonomy. Cooke (2007) likens El Saadawi's work to universal masterpieces of literature, like that of Sophocles'. She hints at the style employed by the author and how it enabled the readers to be drawn into the catastrophic life of an Arab lady in prison, one day before her execution. Also, Cooke elaborates on the way El Saadawi succeeded in making *Firdaus*' own disappointments and pains as if her own (qtd. in El-Saadawi (b), viii). In short, El Saadawi's novel revolves around *Firdaus*, a woman condemned to death for killing a pimp. It retells her childhood with her family, the act of rape committed against her by her uncle and how she became a prostitute and finally her rationale for killing.

On the other hand, Yeziarska's novel is about *Sara Smolinsky*, an immigrant child growing up with a family of three sisters in New York. The sisters' identities were shaped by their father's "fiercely religious patriarchal beliefs" who, like *Firdaus*' father, believes that a "Jewish woman has little to hope for as an individual" (Bucci 47). *Sara* worked hard to help alleviate her family's hunger and deprivation. To do so, she collects coal ashes for heat and sells mackerel. However, doing this kind of job is not very unusual for immigrant families' children who dream of having promising dreams. Ewen (1985) explains how immigrant children work on utilizing the city debris and pieces of wood as sources of their income and also as a source to financially support their families (152-3). As a coming-of-age girl, she used to watch her authoritarian father as he forces his daughters to marry wealthy men under the pretext of his Jewish religious teachings. None of her sisters was married based on her own choice or based on love. Her sisters' dreams for a marriage of love turn to be distant because they obey their father's will. Recognizing the positive role of education, *Sara* pursues

her education at the local school and attends a college, where she earns a degree in education. This eventually qualifies her to teach for an elementary school in New York, thus realizing the American dream. Influenced by the American dream, Sara refuses to submit to her father's ambitions regarding her future. However, as an outsider in America, she has had many problems, especially for being identified "un-American".

The discussion below will include two parts: Part one is twofold (patriarchy and religion) and is related to the factors that look down at women and therefore oppress them while part two sums up the protagonists' journey into self-liberation. For each part, excerpts from the novels will be provided along with commentary and criticism from different schools of feminism.

2. Patriarchal Discourse

Patriarchal authority plays a big role in suppressing, marginalizing and silencing women. Socially constructed roles often thwart the potentials of women and deny their rights of education and work which represent the passage women can take to the world of autonomy. Here, as far as the protagonists in the current study are concerned, readers will be stunned to notice that it is not only the authoritarian male who oppresses women, but it is also women themselves who play a role in oppressing other women. Grant (1993) refers to victimized woman as "category woman," a term derived from an early radical feminist notion i.e., 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 [patriarchy] justified the emerging view that the connections between them as women outweighed all others" (20).

That said, the protagonists in El Saadawi and Yeziarska's novels are oppressed for being females. In the course of her opposition to feminist biocriticism which "places the body at the center of a search for female identity", Showalter (2009) alerts that the biological difference can be used as a pretext to justify the domination of one sex over the other (252). To escape the hardships she experiences at home and to cope with male supremacy and assigned gender roles, Firdaus turns to prostitution. Here, I argue that despite the negative representation in the Eastern and Western cultures about the image of a prostitute, becoming a prostitute has equipped Firdaus with a sense of empowerment over her oppressor. This has had some positive impact on her throughout the novel where readers can notice how she was able to usurp most men's financial and physical powers. This, in turn, has equipped her with more rebelliousness and challenge, a feature that not only help them dominate men but also break their silence. Drawing upon the same theme, Joreen (1969), notices that a bitch has a positive meaning, that "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 patriarch-dominated societies, women are perceived as being biologically and socially inferior and also as being subordinate to men. The protagonists in question feel they are socially discriminated against, silenced and oppressed. This accounts for their loss of identity and alienation from humanity despite their endeavors to achieve social acceptance. It might also force these women to embrace a self that may not belong to her.

In fact, understanding the inner selves of the two feminist protagonists is necessary since it helps readers understand why patriarchy suppresses women as they attempt to speak up. According to Lyons (1988) the self is divided into either "connected self" [nonautonomous] and "separate/objective self" [autonomous] (55). Assumingly, while males are supposed to be autonomous, females are considered "nonautonomous". Sara and Firdaus are therefore autonomous-driven since their acts and choices indicate they no longer accepted being connected with societal stereotypes that always force them to be inferior. They had great ambitions rather than soaking chicken in the morning for their husbands to make lunch (*Woman at Point Zero*, 33). Teicholz (1988) comments on a self that is similar to that of Sara's father and Firdaus' uncle. Teicholz states that "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 ambition" (36). This could be an excellent interpretation to what occurred to Sara's father after his arrival to America and Firdaus' uncle, who depends 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. Sara's father could not celebrate 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 simply because her guardian 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 which exploit them materially and physically. Smolinsky 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 (1969) 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 view, this raised the question of "what is it that unites women under the same banner?" (7-8) certainly women in both texts do not show any sort of unity, thus enforcing and maintaining male supremacy.

3. Institutionalized and/or Gendered Religion

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. That is, 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 (*Woman at Point Zero* 12).

What Firdaus' father considers a sin contradicts what he does in his daily life since he cheats people, steals their fields, treats his daughter as a commodity, and despises 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" (*Woman at Point Zero* 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" (*Woman at Point Zero* 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. Sara 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" (*Bread Givers* 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" (*Bread Givers* 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 Sara 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 anymore 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 (*Bread Givers* 65).

Although Sara'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, Firdaus and Sara neither value religions nor ever think of them as good solutions to their daily life matters. They also challenge the religious teachings their parents and communities promote.

4. Quest of Self-empowerment

Arising from the miserable living conditions Firdaus and Sara experienced they sought to establish their own identities in societies whose religions and patriarchies candidly marginalize and oppress women for their gender. However, Firdaus and Sara benefited from every available condition to empower themselves, especially in light of reading and work. Alcott (1988) thoroughly elaborates on how a subject can "choose[s]" the discursive positions she occupies. She

sees women's lives as a necessary point of departure for feminism and explains how an economic position might play a grand role in helping females better choose. She maintains,

[T]he concept of positionality [and/or the economic choice] 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 'positionality' is an important pillar of (Marxist) feminism, it is clear that protagonists' decisions are taken carefully after long struggle with their societal standards and patriarchal authority because they had to be responsible for their choices. Sara, for example, insists not to accept charity, for not being a beggar, to purchase the herring which she used to earn money to help her family pay the rent (Bucci 48). She mentions "I want to go into business like a person because earning twenty-five cents a day made me feel independent, like a real person" (*Bread Givers* 21).

The same previous idea is further supported by Cott (1987) who assumes that the "material conditions of wage-earning and urban settlement made it feasible for a significant minority of women to distinguish themselves from the lot of women, to assert individual choice in livelihood [and] personal relationships" (39). Improving their financial circumstances will enable them to take a 'position' and/or an 'economic choice' in their society. It is argued that capitalism "reinforces the patriarchal ownership and controls the structures of society all within the false discourse of women's liberation and economic choice" (Julia para.3). However, I argue that even with the unassuming nature at work and the low wages this economic choice may liberate these women from patriarchal authority and may well give them many opportunities to proceed ahead. Firdaus' and Sara's choices lead them to positions that evade them being exploited, which could be interpreted as positive.

In addition to labor and economic choice, exploitation plays a great role in empowering protagonists to be decision makers. Smolinsky used to take all the wages earned by his daughters while he stayed at home reading religious books. Also, Firdaus' uncle took her dowry without giving her any money. Marxists believe that since the human being is the one who creates the labor, s/he should be able to have the power over it. Although women's labor issue is always a continuation and a reproduction of the masculine hegemony, it functions as an empowerment factor for them. Through their work force earnings and prominence, they can buy some products that would enable them to be independent and therefore liberate themselves (Julia, para. 2). This notion is further emphasized by McRobbie (2007) who explains that an economic choice functions to "displace traditional modes of patriarchal authority" (718). This supports the current argument which emphasizes that the protagonists have used their economic choices as empowering factors to fight patriarchal authority and attain their liberties.

Despite her fatal end, Firdaus manages to speak and respond at the end of the narrative as she announces her refusal to live in a hypocrite and a masculine-oriented society and as she makes her choice to kill. She is therefore portrayed as a victim of gendered discrimination which estranges her from her family and society and drives her to prostitution. Like any other Egyptian girl, nobody asks her whether she wanted 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, the guy she married and a replicate of her father, 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 I preferred" (*Woman at Point Zero* 47). These conditions evoke her quest of 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?" (*Woman at Point Zero* 16) These questions instilled in Firdaus 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 she sleeps with.

Education also plays a major role in empowering the protagonists. Hurrelmann and Albert (2006) argued that the socio-economic background positively affects educational performance and therefore results in more promising future (qtd. in Scharff 2009). As an educated woman who embraces the American dream, Sara rejects the patriarchal belief that a woman without a man is "less than nothing" (*Bread Givers* 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 immigrate to the United States where "it's a new life now [where] women do not need men to boss them" (*Bread Givers* 137). In a conversation with her mother, she emphatically discloses that she 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" (*Bread Givers* 130). Repelling against a 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 the times, "Thank God, I'm living in America! You made the lives of the other children! I'm going to make my own life!" (*Bread Givers* 138). She proclaims.

5. Conclusion

It is found that there are many commonalities between the protagonists in the novels addressed. Protagonists in El Saadawi and Yeziarska's novels engage in struggle against the oppression they are exposed to by patriarchy and institutionalized religion. They suffer in their homes of origin due to the prevailing religious and patriarchal beliefs. However, both reject these beliefs and decided to forge special identities of their own in search of self-liberation and

self-empowerment. Another commonality is that both have benefited from the economic choices available for them and employ these choices to reject the exploitation of patriarchal authority and gendered religions.

The decisions the protagonists make in the two works have equipped 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 that deserves exploration more 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.

In short, in El Saadawi's novel, Firdaus realizes her means of self-independence and freedom through the power of reading (knowledge), the power of strong will, and the power of work. In Yeziarska's novel, Sara seeks material independence i.e., her economic liberating choice, 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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