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Death as a Way of Women's Resistance: Feminist Reading of Snow and Women at Point Zero

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ABSTRACT

Women's life without oppression, suppression and discrimination is the claim of women's rights. Women are subjected to discrimination or violence at various phases of life, by rules and cultures. Unfortunately, female discrimination and oppression are rooted in the cultures of male-dominated societies. Gender discrimination is the practice of denying or granting privilege or rights to someone according to her/his gender, and such practice is acceptable to both; in such societies with such practices and traditions, women's mission for liberating themselves is seen to be impossible because they have to challenge longstanding customs and traditions of people. This study shed light on the practices of oppression, gender discrimination that women encounter from infancy to adulthood, from childhood to womanhood, as portrayed in Orhan Pamuk's *Snow* and Nawal El Saadawi's *Women at Point Zero*, as well as the various ways of resistance depending on the cultural differences. Their persistence trial to free themselves from oppression and male dominance. In *Women at Point Zero*, there is a link between the triple effect of patriarchy, religion, and class on women. This study examines how patriarchal culture, violence, oppression, and gender discrimination happen not only in a family; in contrast, the violence does not happen from men, husbands in families only, but again in wives, women's resistance and reaction against them. In *Snow*, women many problems related to their religious norms. The women's discrimination is because of using headscarves; Kadhife, the female character, is sketched as a woman who attempts to have her right to support and defend women's rights in her place, Kars, and to retain wearing headscarves.

Keywords: Female Discrimination, Oppression, Violence, Feminism, Women's literature

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INTRODUCTION

For years, women's longstanding culture and tradition consider women property of men and have to rely on men's power. Furthermore, the typical role is to stay at home, and unfortunately, although we live in a modern world, female oppression still exists because of the patriarchal structure. Most societies' religious, cultural beliefs and traditions give the policy for patriarchy to ensure and continue domination, suppression, and repression of women. Furthermore, any trial by women to liberate themselves from these long-term traditions is perceived as a challenge to this traditional culture seen as sacrilege. Therefore, in most cases, women have no choice other than to accept their second-class position.

Men and women differ physically and socially. In physical expressions, women are fatter and have less muscle than men, while men are strong. (Wardhaugh, 1986, p. 303). In social terms, again, they are different; their social roles differ in society. Women do not usually occupy a top level position in work as men, although, in some societies, women contribute to economic and political spheres and prove their endeavours. Such differences abolish the existence of women, give no advantage to women, and keep women's discrimination.

In some societies, such as those in Africa and Asia, women are respected if they fulfil their stereotypical roles and duties as mothers, homemakers, caregivers, or homemakers. In brief, any other role varying from these traditional duties is seen as an insult to the male authority, resulting in violence, oppression, and, to less extent, gender discrimination.

THEORY

Feminism is a women's movement that claims women's equality and happens almost all over the world. Feminism shares with class conflict assumptions, deconstructing domination and hegemony, oppression between solid and vulnerable groups. Feminism, therefore, stands against the injustice that resulted from patriarch society, culture, philosophy, and history. Hooks (2015) comments on feminism as the movement that demands the end of sexism, oppression, and equality. (xii). Women, accordingly, try through the movement and the theory to attract the cultural awareness that discriminates against women and aims for change and equality. The feminist concern is gender. Gender is used to cope with the social expectation related to masculinity and femininity; admitting that cultures vary from other cultures in their rules, norms, and expectations to masculinity and femininity is a clear hint that gender is

socially constructed. Moreover, such social constructions of gender result from inequality in defining women itself. Furthermore, this inequality occurs in several aspects like education, work position, political right, and even inside the family, depending on the culture of that particular society. Gender differences are concerned with the first feminism because they produce gender inequality as stereotypes, marginalization, and subordination. The gender differences' framework is helpful to face and stand against the notion that men are rational, powerful, and masculine; while women are the opposite. Such stereotype differences result in adverse impact, and such oppressed condition is natural and not socially constructed. (Sugianti, 2018)

Gender discrimination results in oppression and violence against women, and in many countries, women become victims of the sex industry without any respect for human values. Furthermore, such exploitation leads to suffering, despair, defeat, and many end with death for women. In addition, many women are susceptible to sexual despising because they become victims of the violence they encounter or undergo as female workers or servants.

THE SUBJECT MATTER OF THE STUDY

This paper examines two novels Orhan Pamuk's *Snow* and Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, from feminist's lens, shedding light on different subjugating conditions like gender discrimination in the workplace, sexual abuse, domestic violence, bride-burning, child-brides, female genital mutilation, and discrimination in religious institutions. The study examines Firdaus' way, the female character in El Saadawi's novel, of liberation, using violence to free herself from men's confinement. She kills Marzouk, who wants to be her pimp, to liberate herself and attain total freedom. As a result, she refuses to live and face her fate when sentenced by the Egyptian Court of Law. This act may be seen as achieving her freedom in dignity, not living in her phallogocentric ambience but by death. Nevertheless, the double face system judges Firdaus with the maxim sentence of death and silence her forever, understanding her trial and struggle to live without the male physical and moral attacks in dominant male society.

Set in Egypt, *Woman at Point Zero* depicts the longstanding culture and religious beliefs favouring males. It is a valid account of a woman waiting for her sentence to death, and it meets Ngugi's

statement, “literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum, it is given impetus, shape, particular society” (xv). The novel tells the story of a woman called Firdaus, whom men abuse. From childhood till death, She is abused by men. While in the other novel by Orhan Pamuk, *Snow*, Kadife, a female character, is a strong woman who struggles for the right and the choice of headscarf-wearing, other female characters struggle for women’s right to wear headscarves.

METHODOLOGY

This paper examines two different ways of resisting the long tradition of male dominance according to the norms and cultures of the societies in which they live. There is no unified way of resistance over there, rather than a hybrid, diasporic nature. Due to the similarities of these two novels, gender discrimination, violence, and female resistance which female and male writers tell, this study will analyze the two novels using comparative literature and focus on gender discrimination in two literary texts from two different cultures, societies, and countries. The research design is the feminist approach as it examines gender discrimination, oppression, and violence as the object of analysis; thus, the suitable approach is the feminist one for comprehending women’s

issues and women’s life. (Mulvey, 1988, p.74).

DISCUSSION

Female discrimination and oppression are rooted in the cultures of male-dominant societies. Gender discrimination, violence, and oppression towards women are global phenomena with a long tradition as old as human existing. Women’s life without oppression is the claim of women’s rights; moreover, these rights are inherent and governed by law. Consequently, gender discrimination and exploitation against women are the opposite of human rights, natural justice, equity, and good governance. Gender discrimination and violence are sometimes part of religious and cultural traditions. Until recently, women in some countries were deprived of the right to choose or even refuse their husbands or suitors, choose their education, and in other cases, choose their dress style. Women have to obey the decisions of the male members in their family, work, or government. As a wife, a woman has to obey and fulfil her husband’s wishes without complaint; otherwise, she is not decent or virtuous. Gender discrimination uncovers the female character’s positions and conditions in *Snow* by Orhan Pamuk and *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi.

In *Snow*, gender discrimination is there when women have been deprived of the right to wear headscarve in public places by the government. Thus, *Snow* becomes a typical example of women living in a patriarchal system. The novel's setting is during the top of conflicts, political turbulence, and civil war involving Communists, Muslim extremists, and Kurdish nationalists, under Turkey's secularist government, as the effect of Ataturk's Westernization, the father of Turks, in 1924. The women face this gender discrimination based on personal religious beliefs imposed by the government because of a conventional and robust patriarchal system, as Pamuk (2005) describes:

When the authorities had outlawed headscarf-wearing in educational institutions across the country, many women refused to comply; non-compliant young women at Kars' Institute of Education had been barred first from the classrooms following an Ankara edict from the entire campus. (p.14)

The first president of Turkey, Mustafa Ataturk, in 1923, changes the monarchical system depending on Islamic beliefs to the secular republic system. Ataturk reforms law and constitution. The new reforms are applied to grant a finer

life for Turkish women, but sadly, it negatively impacts them. The government prohibits the headscarve, as it prohibits the traditional cloth, fez in social reforms. By adopting the European constitution and law, Ataturk erupts the Islamic tradition of wearing headscarve. By adapting Eurocentrism, Ataturk thinks that women in Turkey will get a higher reputation by abandoning the Islamic hijab. He is adapting and imitating Eurocentrism, which is alien to the Turkish tradition at that time, looking at the Islamic hijab and head-scarves as inferior, which Edward Said talked about as much as Ataturk did. Regardless of whether the imposed rules by the government have any religious, secular background or foundation, the idea of imposing something is what matters, especially if such behaviour does not cause any harm to the public or national issues. In the case of *Snow*, the reform applied by Ataturk, including banning women from wearing headscarve, has the same negative impact forcing or imposing the use of Islamic hijab in some Islamic countries. Both faces are of the same coin to conduct a rule by force. In *Snow*, Women's oppression is not only government-caused; it is also caused by parents, as in the female character, Ipek. Ipek is being oppressed to wear a headscarf by her husband. She refuses to use the headscarve and to have a child from her husband.

Commenting on the women's suicide, Bagli and Sever (2003) conclude, "indeed, their actions may reflect a desperate rational choice to break the chains of structural, cultural, gendered oppressions ... [women] cannot control their lives, only their deaths" (80). Women's suicide in *Snow* comes after the conflict and the debate between the secular government and religious groups of whether to use the headscarve or not, regardless of the women's opinion or consent, not counting their presence even. Both sides want to apply their ideologies on women's bodies as their battleground. Clemens (2011) argues that, throughout his novel, Pamuk introduces a chance for the girls' voices to be heard (p. 138,154). Throughout his lines, the world has perceived how women are trapped between the secular state and religious groups, how the patriarchal system has silenced these girls, and how they have been silenced forever by death when they choose to commit suicide. The omniscient narrator, Pamuk, retells the stories of girls in Kars, the first one "forced into an engagement with an elderly teahouse owner" (Pamuk, 2004, p.13) the second girl suffers from two hard whacks as a result of an argument with her father over a remote control. The third girl gets married when she was fifteen years old and being "terrorized by the beatings given

to her by her depressed and unemployed husband" (p.13).

The construction of the gender role in such a society outlines the life of the women there. Teslime's uncle speaks with Ka regarding her death "His niece had married two years earlier, forced to do housework from morning till night, she had also endured the incessant scolding of her mother-in-law for failing to conceive a child" (p.15). Once again, society oppresses women using her body; like Firdaus in EL Saadawi's novel, the female character, Teslime in Pamuk's *Snow* is perceived as a womb. She has been insulted by her mother-in-law, making her working all day till night. Thus, women's bodies become a tool to apply cultural and social practices.

At last, Teslime chooses death as a way of resistance to the de-scarf reform conducted by the state. Another unnamed girl suicide because her teacher accuses her of not being a virgin, "her teacher accused her of not being a virgin. Once the rumour had spread all over Kars, the girl's fiancé called off the engagement, and the other young suitors still coming to the house to ask for this beautiful girl had although the betrothal stopped coming" (p.15). She is judged according to her gender because men and women are treated differently in an extramarital sex

affair. This unnamed girl chooses to end her life, instead of being killed by honour-killing one family member, as she finds no other solution. Although she knows her body more than anyone else, she is untouched, yet realizes she will not marry anymore. She gets helpless, she is violated to suicide regardless of her permission, and she cannot speak about her virginity in life, yet her private truth becomes public knowledge after her death. Women cannot raise their voices, cannot have their choice of life, cannot defend themselves. Moreover they are pushed to the only salvation to liberate themselves from violence and oppression by death.

The oppression and violence against women exist in many personal experiences of women throughout their lives. Many shreds of evidence show how women have been victimized sexually without respect for them as humans. Furthermore, sadly, the exploitation results in defeat, suffering, and death for women or others. Mostly, women-violence victims are labourers, servants, or commercial sex workers.

In Women at Point Zero, the female character, Firdaus, is tormented and abused sexually by men since her childhood. Firdaus is a poor peasant woman “her father was a poor peasant farmer who could neither read nor write,

knew tiny things in life except how to grow crops and exchange his virgin daughter for a dowry” (El Saadawi, 1983, p. 10). She has duties at home and obviously without any rights or respect to her needs, “carrying heavy earthenware jar, full of water on her head, sweeping under the animals and then making rows of dung cakes which she would leave in the sun to dry. On a baking day, she would knead the dough and make bread” (p.11). Firdaus develops a longing to live hood and love, both in sexual pleasure and affection; growing up in a low-income family, Firdaus sees her father violent her mother, beating her, and sometimes Firdaus. She hardly gets money from her father. Firdaus has had a sexual experience with Mohammaden since early, much before undergoing the cruel practice of female circumcision by her mother and the circumciser. This genital mutilation dismisses her right to get sexual pleasure and satisfaction and later becomes a sign of her identity. She loses sexual satisfaction as she confesses when she engages in guilty sexual practice with her uncle. El Saadawi (1983) writes:

He was doing to me what Mohammadain had done to me before. In fact, he was even doing more, but I no longer felt the intense sensation of pleasure that radiated from an unknown and yet familiar

part of my body. I closed my eyes and tried to reach the pleasure I had known before but in vain. It was as if I could no longer recall the exact spot from which it used to arise or as though a part of me, of my being, was gone and would never return. (p.13)

Firdaus's ability to exercise sexuality gets decapitated, and this affects her physically and psychologically. As a result, "she loses not only physical sensation, but also a psychic bond with her mother, ... in participating in her daughter's genital mutilation, the mother broke the bond with her daughter, and Firdaus no longer saw or experienced her mother in the same way" (Abdullah, 2015, p.81). The genital mutilation makes her victim to the patriarchal society. Such society humiliates and enslaves women not only by men but their fellow members, by women. In the case of Firdaus, it is her mother and the other woman who participate in the circumcision. The first male in her life, her father practice selfishness and hegemony out of poverty; Firdaus misses the warmth she needs at tender age as her father used to take her place in winter. As El Saadawi (1983) describes, "Our hut was cold, yet in winter, my father used to shift my straw mat and my pillow to the small room facing north

and occupy my corner in the oven room" (p.16).

Moreover, instead of staying by Firdaus's side to keep her warm, her mother "used to abandon me alone and go to my father to keep him warm" (p.16). Firdaus "would see her sitting at his feet with a tin mug in her hands during the summer days as she washed his leg with cold water. When I grow a little older, my father put the mug in my hand and taught me how to wash his legs with water; I had now replaced my mother and did the things she used to do. (p.16)

So, it is not only Firdaus who suffers from her father's hegemony but even her mother, whose status is reduced to a machine and warmth provider. Without any tender sense towards his daughter, she shifts to the colder side of the hut so that her father takes her warm place. Moreover, things are worse when the father matters than his wife and daughter, even if they remain without food, the father is not, El Saadawi (1983) makes it vivid:

My father never went to bed without supper, no matter what happened. Sometimes when there was no food at home, we would all go to bed with empty stomachs. But he would never fail to have a meal. My mother would hide his food from us at the

bottom of one of the holes in the oven. He would sit eating alone while we watched him. One evening I dared to stretch out my hand to his plate, but he struck me a sharp blow over the back of my fingers. (p.17, 18)

Firdaus's father, as Palmer (2013) describes, "not just as irresponsible, but almost as greedy, ravenous, rapacious devouring predator, anxious to consume every bit of food within reach and ensure that no one else gets any of it, and who is ultimately responsible for the death of his children" (p.95). She begins her battle against patriarchal behaviour practised by her father at an early age, begins to perceive her self-worth through her experiences at home. She knows that man has power while a woman is not; a boy has valued more than a girl in the family. Out of poverty, the percentage of death among the infant is high; thus, when the dead child is female, the father does not feel its loss.

On the contrary, he grieves, frustrates, blames the mother, and beats her if it is a boy. This act shows the diminished identity of the women in the view of men; the father does not consider her as a human, then what if she dies as El Saadawi (1983) writes, "For like most people, I had many brothers and sisters.

They were like chicks that multiply in spring, shiver in winter and lose their feathers, and then in summer are stricken with diarrhoea, waste away quickly, and one by one creep into a corner and died" (p.17). When one of his female kids die, her father eats his supper, her mother washes his legs as usual and then "he would go to sleep, just as he did every night. When a child that died was a boy, he would beat my mother, then have his supper and lie down to sleep". (p.17). Again, Firdaus encounter another phase of exploitation and this time from Firdaus's uncle in Cairo. When she joins to live with him after her parent's death, he uses her for his selfish needs, harasses her sexually, working as a housekeeper in his house in return for promising her to continue her study. Again, she hopes to get freedom from the oppression of her past life with her parents.

The condition of the Arab Muslim women differs from Western, and if we look at the conditions of Arab women, we have to apply another offshoot of feminist criticism; we cannot generalize Western women's experiences and consider it a foundation or framework of the feminist claim. The Arabic Muslim women suffer from triple marginalization, discrimination, and oppression, being a woman, gender discrimination, imposing some faults religious rules on her, and her

social class and economic independence, class differences represent one of the factors that Arabic or Muslim women suffer from, being poor is another challenging factor along with gender discrimination. Therefore, like El Saadawi, writers write without fear or excuse, with women's voices challenging the old system responsible for oppression. Part of the plight of women is the prevailing silence from the women themselves, mothers, grandmothers; they are not only accepting discrimination by men whether they are fathers, brothers, husbands, employers, or colleagues at the workplace but, moreover, try to widow and demolish any resistance. The male acquired this privilege of dominance from childhood, and the bringing up encourages them to behave like that in their adulthood. Thus, this half of society, women, is not counted culturally and counted as disabled. On the contrary, women are seen as handicapped in such male-dominant societies.

In some Arabic societies, women are silenced by women as well as by their mothers. Most of the Arabic families, especially mothers, never listen to their daughters; miseries and problems. Married women may receive insults or mistreatment by their husbands or even from his family, and the wives should accept such insults, and even beating as a part of good morals. Furthermore, if they

complain, no one listens, and society, their families accuse them of not being responsible for the marital bond. Such repression, silencing the suffering and need of married women or women in general, leads to disastrous ends in many cases. Such oppressed women feel that they are alone socially, marginalized, reducing their entity to a mere provider of comfort to the male. Independent economically, they may search for an unreasonable exit and find disastrous solutions that destroy their lives, their kids, and the surrounding ones, ending either with death or their unknown fate on the street. Not listening to the women's agony, forcing them to obey male decisions, and being tolerant of domestic violence lead some women to commit suicide, kill their partners, or flee from their marital house. Moreover, another exploitation journey begins when Firdaus' father refuses to listen to his daughter's complain about her life with her husband, Mahmood. As a result, she escapes to the street the next time Her fate is ridiculous when her family does not provide her safe and proper life, and she goes to an unfamiliar place.

In the case of Firdaus, it shows the amount of exploitation, oppression that starts from the closest people in her life, her family, her father, her uncle, her husband, and then comes the others. She is reduced to a separate entity, a human,

deprived of the most straightforward right in her life, warm sleeping and having proper food, and in broader vision education and their work. Her uncle exploits her; all the men in her life exploit her, marginalized her ambitions, wills, and wellbeing. Furthermore, even she gets a ray of hope of getting freedom and liberate herself through education, she finds another predator, her uncle, who uses her as a servant and pleasure provider. Moreover, this is why he spares her after his marriage, finding other suppliers for his selfish needs, his wife.

Such a long history of silencing the female constructs a collective experience, building the inferior status of the women and even within her, convincing of her unworthiness, losing their self-esteem and self-trust, and failing to decide by herself without relying on a male presence. She defines herself with her relation to the male, the daughter of someone, wife of someone, sister of someone, or the mother of someone, and of course, each of the “someone” is a male. Thus, her presence is related to male presence, and her identity connects to the male identity.

Such heavy discriminative history of the female’s social representation in the family becomes usual to the extent that any rising voice to equal treatment and

view to females is considered radical and damn. That is why willing or unwilling, convinced or not, women follow the cultural norms without any objection.

CONCLUSION

Heavy heritage and hostile relics from many factors affect the conditions of women in a patriarchal society. Some factors are based on cultural, religious, traditional norms of that society. Other factors are based on pro-Westernization, pro-Eurocentrism, and downgrading East religious or cultural issues, such as the conditions of women in *Snow*. In both cases, the effect is that women are generally discriminated against and are silenced. Once women try to raise their voices, they are seen as non-virtual, radical, sometimes atheist, or even ignorant. In the plight of Ataturk’s reforms, he could not separate politics from religion. Ataturk wanted to control Islam politically and eliminate it from public and private everyday life. In the light of the debate and the clash between the state force and fundamentalist. All these parties have ignored the voice of women. As in *Women at Point Zero*, when *Firdaus* finds her final liberation from dominant male society. In Pamuk’s *Snow*, women find in suicide their final salvation, especially *Teslime*. Their suicide becomes a way of resistance to reforms and anxiety

about change, imitating the west, embracing Eurocentrism, a way of liberation, and protesting when the government ignores their choices in

wearing headscarve. Suicide comes when the women struggle so that their voices are heard but in vain.



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