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**WOMANISM BETWEEN AFRICAN-AMERICAN AND ARAB
WOMEN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SELECTED
WORKS BY ALICE WALKER AND NAWAL EL SAADAWI**

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Abstract

Women all over the world have been facing various kinds of struggles to achieve their true position. In order to fulfill this goal, womanism has formed one of the most important themes of many female writers' literature. A comparative analysis of the literary works written by these writers can very well unveil how similarly they have been thinking regarding this issue. This study intends to compare such issues as womanism and identity within *Meridian* by Alice Walker as an Afro-American writer with conflicts within Nawal El Saadawi's novel, *Woman at Point Zero*. To do so, the writer will benefit from a

feminism approach. In other words, this paper proposes to investigate the relationship between *Meridian* and *Woman at Point Zero*, so as to examine whether these novels embrace the womanist ideas and to trace the development of the womanism theory through a comparative study between *Meridian* and *Woman at Point Zero*. It will be found that in both contexts, both the protagonists, Meridian and Firdaus, look for self-realization, liberation, and free-will. It will be found that both *Meridian* and *Woman at Point Zero* have symbolized Walker's view of womanism by discussing a sequence of anti-sexism and anti-racism struggles. The conclusion is that in *Meridian* and *Woman at Point Zero*, the womanist thought has been employed extensively to write them.

Key Terms: Feminism, Identity, Patriarchy, Womanism.

1. Introduction

In spite of belonging to different contexts, both Walker and El Saadawi share a lot of similarities in their writings; for example, they both attempted to portray the struggle of women for freedom in an environment which was full of conflicts in different aspects. In fact,

the main goal of comparative analysis approach is the investigation of association between different literary works with different settings.

Comparative literature is assumed as the study of two or more literatures especially when they are of different cultures and histories.

It mainly copes with particular topics like writers and their biographies. (Encompass 2006). Remak (1961) defined comparative literature as "the study of the relationships between literature on one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts (e.g., painting, sculpture, and music), philosophy and history" (p. 57).

Comparative literature chiefly consists of two schools: the American and the French schools which are different from each other. Actually, the American School of comparative literature was established as a reaction against the French one. It mostly concentrated on the literary texts themselves and their context rather than the influence between the texts. It expanded and was different in a way that the scholars of this school"... loved always to expand the section of Comparative Literature for the entrance of various global artistic and literary trends in this zone" (Abd Rahman and Shamsuddin, 2012).

This study's main goal is the analysis of the issue of womanism in *Meridian* by Alice Walker and El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* using the comparative approach. Therefore, there will be a short introduction to these two writers and their novels as well as feminism. Feminism mainly aims to teach women that they are accomplished and talented to achieve their true position. Feminism is actually a reply to gender issues because there are many women who have been constantly struggling for an equally accredited voice the same as men. According to bell hooks (2000), feminism is "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression"(p. 54). Of course, this definition is not only about the white women and black women have a particular role in this regard because they experience a different kind of subjugation from that of white women. Black feminism then comes into existence which is according to Patricia Hill (1990), a movement of "women who theorize the experiences and ideas shared by ordinary Black women that provide a unique angle of vision on self, community and society" (p.221). Betty Friedan is regarded as one of the most important feminist activists whose *The Feminine Mystique* as a comprehensive critique of middle-

class traditions. She believed that women's only way to express themselves was through marriage, so, she encouraged women to look for new responsibilities and identities so that they do not have to be defined by others and the society (quoted in Cincotta, 1994, p. 322). In addition, In *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism* (1979), Smith speaks of how feminism is too often blind toward black women;

I think of the thousands and thousands of books, magazines, and articles which have been devoted by this time, to the subject of women s writing and I am filled with rage at the fraction of those pages that mention Black and other Third World Women. I finally do not know how to begin because in 1977 I want to be writing this for a Black feminist publication, for Black women who know and love these writers as I do and who, if they do not yet know their names, have at least profoundly felt the pain of their absence. (p. 189)

1.1 Alice Walker and *Meridian*

Walker was born and grew up in Georgia. When she was eight years old, her brother shot her with his gun and left her blind in one eye.

This blemish made her shy and insecure, which led to inspiring her to find other ways like writing to show herself. The accident resulted in Walker becoming alienated from her father, because he could not find appropriate medical cure for her. In contrast, Walker respected her mother's power and determination in spite of being poor. Alice Walker is one of the most noteworthy existing black American writers. In her work she mainly concentrated on feminist subjects that she addressed as womanist issues.

Walker's first source of inspiration was Zora Neale Hurston. Her essay *The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?* is regarded as one of her best writings. Afterward, Walker edited a collection of Hurston's fiction called *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing ... and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader* that appeared in 1979. Additional short stories were collected in *In Love and Trouble* (1973) and *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981). The novel, *The Color Purple* could also win both the Pulitzer Prize and The American Book Award.

Meridian(1976) revolves around the story of Meridian and her growth. Meridian encounters a number of conflicts such as the

conflict imposed by civil rights, and the struggle of rebuffing to accept the compulsory traditional female roles of mother and wife. Meridian represents one of the million women suffering from oppression whose taking action plays a great role in their achieving the position they have been wishing for.

As mentioned, this is a story of a young black woman's efforts to know who she is in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s; it also portrays a clashed love triangle between Meridian, her black boyfriend, Truman, and a white, Jewish woman friend, Lynne, whom he marries. Although its chief theme is the struggles of black women in sexist, racist America, the novel also shows the restrictions of cross-racial associations between two marginal groups, Blacks and Jews. It is cited that,

It would have been joy for him to forget her, as it would have been joy never to have been his former self. But running away from Lynne, at every opportunity, and existing a few days in Meridian's presence, was the best that he could do. (p. 152)

This part defines Truman's complex relationship with Meridian. He wants to forget that he ever felt in love with Meridian or wanted her

in any way, in order to stay with Lynne and be gratified in his marriage. However, Truman can't flee from the past, and he can't change his strong feelings towards Meridian. He can't stay away from her: he seeks her out as she moves from town to town, and he leaves his wife to spend days with her. Also, Karen Stein (1986) marks,

. . . the novel points out that the Civil Rights Movement often reflected the oppressiveness of patriarchal capitalism. Activists merely turned political rhetoric to their own ends while continuing to repress spontaneous individuality. To overcome this destructiveness, Walker reaches for a new definition of revolution. Her hope for a just society inheres not merely in political change, but in personal transformation. (p. 130)

1.2 Nawal El Saadawi and *Woman at Point Zero*

Nawal El Saadawi (1931) is an Egyptian feminist writer, activist, doctor, and psychoanalyst. In her writings, she has mostly focused upon the subject of female dismemberment in her society. She has devoted most of her life to supporting gender equivalence. She has also pointed out the association between women's sexual coercion and

women's social and political subjugation. She has confidently called for changes in the position of the Arabic woman. Her writings include novels and articles that have concentrated on the manipulation of the Arabic women, chiefly in rustic Egypt because of religion and the government.

Woman at Point Zero is a novel by Nawal El Saadawi published in 1975. This novel is mostly based on Saadawi's meeting with a female prisoner named Firdaus, a murderess who has agreed to tell her life story before her execution. The novel probes into the issues of the suppression of women, female circumcision, and women's liberty in a masculine society.

1.3 Literature Review

Both Walker and El Saadawi are among the most reputed writers in the realm of female writers; therefore, there can be found plenty of books, articles, and essays, each one analyzing a particular subject in their works. However, there has not been any paper regarding the comparative analysis of *Meridian* and *Woman at Point Zero* and so the present research is going to fill this gap.

In "Alice Walker and Her womanist Aesthetics" Bhagyathara (2015) has pointed out that walker's works consist of the features of class, gender, repression, race, subsistence, entirety and womanism which support the endurance of all downgraded people. Mirshojaei's "Concepts of Identity in Alice Walker's Major Novels in the Light of Post-colonialism" (2016) is an attempt to reveal the position of Afro-American people in the contemporary world.

Another paper concerning the investigation of Walker's works includes "Gender and Sexuality in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*" (2017) by Mohammed. This research presents Walker's point of view about the issue of sexuality. She also urges for coexistence among people from the different sexual backgrounds.

There are also an extensive number of articles or books about the enquiry of El Saadawi's novel; for instance, "Depiction of Women as the Primary Architects of their own Oppression: A Masculinist Critique of El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*" (2018) tries to show how El Saadawi depicts a tough and revolutionary protagonist whose awareness of women's freedom surprises any reader. This paper has inspected the domination that the female protagonist, Firdaus has to

suffer because of living in a masculine society and how she ultimately achieves a transitory liberation.

Another paper involves "Violence against Women and Resistance in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Zero Point* and Alberto Moravia's *The Woman of Rome*" (2017). As a comparative analysis, this paper ends with showing how both the novels disclose the wrongdoers and the subject have taken advantages one another in their association. Someone who has power is able to control the people by using his or her power. Consequently, it is palpable that the exercise of power occurs in any sort of relationships.

2. Discussion

This part is going to be an analysis of different ways through which the two novels exemplify Walker's theory of womanism. Both *Woman at Point Zero* and *Meridian* embrace the most imperative characteristics of Walker's womanism. To do so, the writer is going to lay her focus on the most important themes which reveal important aspects about womanism. One of the most significant themes regarding the issue of womanism is related to the issue of race and

sexism. In her novel, Walker has made the readers realize that sexism and racism are both among the most longstanding problems and exist between all kinds of people. *Meridian* has provided some cases of these problems like the relationship between Truman and his white beloved, leading him to the thought that she is superior.

Contrary to many other novelists who have been focusing on setting the self free from perceptible difficulties, Walker has made her hero meet two known social problems, racism and sexism in order to disclose her meaning. Walker has also exposed early motherhood as an obstacle to self-realization. In *Meridian*, Alice Walker has actually concentrated one woman's struggle to achieve a sense of identity.

Racism has different effects on different characters in *Meridian* and each one is attempting to understand the world in which ruthless racism is a common issue. The civil rights movement has provided a suitable framework for the book because most of the story happens at a time when all people are extremely active and try to face the detestable retribution. Throughout the book, characters are upset due to the racist system; accordingly, they try to decide how to survive in a world in which their desire for freedom cannot be granted.

As well as racism, Meridian and many of her friends are repetitively diminished and sexually beleaguered by men. They are ill-treated by most of the important people in their lives. In fact, Meridian not only lacks a positive sexual experience, but also has many shocking experiences with men.

Walker's *Meridian* happens in the 1960s, a decade of struggle and pressure for African-Americans, and particularly for American women. The character of Meridian signifies all the women at that time who were in search of their own identity. She was ready to follow education and worked hard as an activist to inspire black people to vote. The condition is not this good in *Woman at Point Zero* because Firdaus symbolizes the very poor condition of women, deprived of the most basic human rights such as their body parts in an Egyptian society which was highly masculine.

Walker's *Meridian* contains three main male characters, including Meridian's father, Eddy as Meridian's first husband and Truman as Meridian's intellectual friend. Although Meridian's father is supportive, he is to some extent inactive and weak. Eddy is a good-looking young man but blind when facing traditions. Truman, by

contrast, is exceedingly active in the civil rights movement. However, he is mixed up with his love situation because her beloved is a white woman and so belonging to the higher class.

Alice Walker has supported piety through the theme of womanism in her works. Actually, she was the very first one who used the term "womanist" in her short story, "Coming Apart", in 1979. Walker (2005) defined a "womanist" as a "black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, 'You acting womanish'", referring to grown-up behavior (p. xi). She (2005) also defines a womanist as:

A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility ... and women's strength. ... Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health ... Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit ... Loves struggle. *Loves* the folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (p. xii)

Another issue that needs to be discussed is related to motherhood. Black motherhood in *Meridian* is more like a kind of problem because it means that having children equals giving up dreams like the dream of education or having a job. When Meridian gives her child up in order to follow her dream, she does not feel free. In fact, she feels guilty and depressed during college. She also feels like she is a problem for her mother, "for a moment, as she looked at Meridian's mother, there was hatred in her sad eyes. Hatred and comprehension of betrayal" (p. 87).

This quotation relates to the moment when Nelda Henderson looks at Meridian's mother. She feels abhorrence because Meridian's mother was one of the most important people in her life who could have advised her about the probable concerns of sex; because she did not do so, Nelda was simple and now has two children.

Yet, she sympathizes with the potent relationship between a mother and her child because of the separation between mothers and their children during slavery. Religion and spirituality are other chief issues in *Meridian*. Meridian's mother is extremely religious and stays away from her daughter when she refuses to go to the church. In contrast,

Meridian and her father experience spiritual changes without traditional religious practices. By the end of the novel, Meridian perceive show traditional religious practices are reformed by the black people to defend the civil rights movement.

The discernment of women is an old story and is happening all over the world. In point of fact, feminism is ubiquitous across the world including the third world countries. This is why Nawal El Saadawi in her book *Woman at Point Zero* has stunningly depicted the circumstance of Egyptian women predominantly Firdaus as the main character of the novel. As already mentioned, this novel is based upon a true story in which Nawal met Firdaus in the prison. Firdaus was a criminal and was waiting for execution. She was somehow waiting for death because of not appealing for life time imprisonment instead of death penalty.

Nawal was interested in knowing about her life and finally Firdaus told her life story which was full of sorrows. Actually, Firdaus was tired of this male-controlled society and death was the only way to escape her grief-stricken life. Just like *Meridian*, *Woman at Point Zero* is the representative of its writer's experiences. In order to write

her novel, El Saadawi (2007) drew from her own experiences. Once she said that,

I hated my femininity, I got angry about my nature and that I did not know anything about my body. All that remained for me was to reject, to challenge, to resist! I rejected my femininity, I challenged my nature, I resisted all the desires of my body, to prove to my mother and to my grandmother that I was not a woman like them, that I would not waste my life in the kitchen peeling onions and garlic, waste my day in order for my husband to be able to eat and eat. I was about to show my mother that I had a higher intelligence than my brother, than the man for whose honor she wanted that I would wear the cream dress, than any man, and that I can do anything which my father did and more. (pp. 20-21)

In *Woman at Point Zero*, we see a woman who has been oppressed in different ways and by different people like her parents and society that should be blamed for her circumcision. Her desire to be independent and have a job seemed so annoying that she was bitten and locked in a room, leading her to escaping and becoming a

prostitute. Next, she decided to gain more respect by changing her job to a low-paid one in an office where she entered a relationship which she thought was perfect. However, it turned out to be unrequited because Ibrahim wanted her only for sex.

Saadawi has always highlighted her fundamental idea that is about women's discernment. She has based her novel up on Firdaus and her disastrous life. In the society where she lives, men have all the power and are protected by the law, traditions and, what is even more important, religion. Men are portrayed as some violent people who believe that the main virtue of a good woman is unconditional submission.

One of the most principal themes in El Saadawi's book is that of sexism as a result of Firdaus being a woman. Firdaus' story arouses in Saadawi the need "to challenge and to overcome those forces that deprive human beings of their right to live, to love, and to real freedom" (p. iv). Through Firdaus' struggles against male supremacy which have been mentioned in the novel and those of her own with the Egyptian society, El Saadawi wants to say that in male-controlled societies like that of Egypt, women were victimized by rules and

traditions because they had no freedom, no financial liberation, and were forced to do house hold chores while men would have more power and reputation.

Toward the end of the 19th century and early 20th century, feminist movement was making progress because Egyptian women were becoming more and more disappointed with their predicament. For the first time, women openly commanded both social and political rights that had been withdrawn in Egypt's masculine society. *Woman at Point Zero* excruciatingly shows the life of Firdaus, a woman resolutely restricted in the limitations of a cruel, mannish community. Just like Meridian, Firdaus also objects to the unethical system that intentionally puts women in the margin of society by slaying her pimp.

As a child, she was very poor and like Meridian, she was raped by male family members where she "no longer felt the strong sensation of pleasure" (p. 12). She would also thought of herself as a burden to her family. Then, she had to marry a 60-year-old man. Her painful story also included being constantly beaten, becoming a prostitute, and, finally, murdering a man, a concluding action which resulted in

her imprisonment in Qanatir. However and in spite of her unhappy life, Firdaus takes pride in herself.

For Firdaus, all men are regarded as a threat; for example, her father is a harsh and self-centered man who is used to beating his wife and only cares about himself. Through the eyes of Firdaus, El Saadawi refers to the role of religion in women's subjugation. Every Friday, her father goes to the mosque to attend the weekly sermon, where the Imam articulately explains the message that "to be obedient was a duty, and to love one's country too. That love of the ruler and love of Allah were one and indivisible"(p. 48). The Imam never says that "stealing was a sin, and killing was a sin, and defaming the honor of a woman was a sin, and injustice was a sin, and beating another human being was a sin"(p. 48). Due to facing lots of limitations, Firdaus kills the last man who intends to deprive her of freedom.

Throughout the novel, Firdaus is the subject of many men's oppression. When she asks for a job to Bayoumi, what she gets is getting slapping and sexual exploitation. One night, Bayoumi's friend physically abused and asks her if she feels pleasure, Firdaus said that "I was afraid to say I felt nothing so I close my eyes once more and

said, 'Yes' (p. 74). It is clear that Firdaus felt shocked with the sexual and physical ferocity. Bayoumi slaps her when she asserts to get a job, "... he jumped up and slapped me on the face; ... on the next moment he hit me with his fist in the belly so hard that I lost consciousness immediately" (p. 74).

She shifts from a daughter to a wife, to a prostitute, to an office employee, and, in the end, she goes back to prostitution. When Firdaus becomes a young beginner in Sharifa's house as a practiced prostitute, Sharifa takes care of her. She also inspires Firdaus to be a strong woman. Firdaus becomes a prostitute for Sharifa, but she does not have the power to ask anything from a man because Sharifa abuses her day by day, "Don't ask for anything. That's not your affair. It's mine" (p. 102), "Day and night, I lay on the bed, crucified, and every hour a man would come in" (p. 102). She does not get anything from her job as a prostitute.

Firdaus is inundated by a distorted ethical pattern that has the right to restrict her identity by home ferocity and sexual exploitation. Firdaus also talks about her clitoridectomy which she experienced in her early childhood. Firdaus' mother "brought a woman who was carrying a

small knife or maybe a razor blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from between [her] thighs"(p. 84).

Firdaus says that she was able to feel sexual pleasure when she played "bride and bridegroom" with a boy, named Mohammad, in the "small shelter made of maize stalks" in the fields. As the protagonist grew up, the circumcision ritual left a permanent effect as a result of the remembered feelings, now lost:

I no longer felt the strong 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. 85)

In *Woman at Point Zero*, El Saadawi has used Firdaus'case to exemplify the reality about the lives of Egyptian women. During the late nineteenth century, women mostly stayed inside and were treated as inferior beings. The novel is a portrait of women in rural Egyptian societies overwhelmed by ignorance, poverty, and violence, which El

Saadawi has employed to discuss the old discernment of women that brought about their weakness in patriarchal cultures.

3. Conclusion

By using comparative approach, this paper tried to build a bridge to fill the gap that women, belonging to different countries and races are connected to each other due to the pain which is caused by subjugation. In spite of being oppressed, both Firdaus and Meridian have their own perspectives. They did not have the social support system but focused on their ability to improve their present situation through different ways. It is concluded that womanism not only infiltrates into *Woman at Point Zero* and *Meridian*, but also is improved in these two literary works; actually, they act as good examples which can encourage women to search for self-realization in the society. Alice Walker and Nawal El Saadawi are both well-known writers who have illustrated the situation of women through the characters of Firdaus and Meridian whose lives were full of miseries. However, unlike Firdaus who demanded death, Meridian attempted very hard to survive and find her freedom. It is essential to declare that both the protagonists through the end found their liberation in their own ways.

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