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The Language of the Female Body:

A Feminist Analysis of Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* and Nawal El Saadawi's *Women at Point Zero*

The narrator in Assia Djebar's *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* states that she speaks four languages: three of these languages are Lyrico-Berber, Arabic, and French. According to the narrator, "the fourth language, for all females, young or old, cloistered or half-emancipated, remains that of the body" (Djebar 180). The body is a powerful tool of communication. Arab women use it to speak when they are verbally silenced, to express grief, and to express rebellion. Unfortunately, the female body is also used against women by oppressors. As evident in Djebar's *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* and Nawal El Saadawi's *Women at Point Zero*, an understanding of how the female body is both manipulated by oppressors and used to women's advantage is key to fully grasping Arabic culture and comprehending Arab literature.

The female body is a tool often taken advantage of by oppressors in order to trample women's rights. Physical abuse sends the message of bigoted hatred to women. One such common practice is female genital mutilation. As of February 2012, the World Health Organization estimates 140 million women worldwide have been abused in this fashion ("Female Genital Mutilation"). The majority of these human rights violations take place in Africa and the Middle East. Female genital mutilation is an umbrella term – in some instances, a woman may undergo a clitoridectomy, where the external clitoris is entirely or partially removed. In other cases, a woman's clitoris and labia minora may be removed and her labia majora sewn together (Obermeyer 82). This practice is known as infibulation. Female genital surgeries are both

unnecessary and dangerous: complications can include bleeding problems, infections, urinary problems, reproductive problems, severe pain, and sexual complications (Obermeyer 93). Even with these complications, the practice is still widespread and even accepted in some areas. According to Bruce Dunne, author of "Power and Sexuality in the Middle East", women in rural Egypt tend to view female circumcision not as a form of violence, but instead as beautification and important to a female identity (Dunne 11). In *Women at Point Zero*, Firdaus, the protagonist is forced to undergo a clitoridectomy as punishment. When Firdaus asks about her father, she was first beaten, then "a woman who was carrying a small knife or maybe a razor blade… cut off a piece of flesh from between [her] thighs (El Saadawi 12). In this instance, Firdaus' body is abused to send her a message far stronger than one communicated via speech.

Defenders of this form of female oppression contend that clitoridectomy is acceptable because it is sanctioned by Islam, and thus a religious practice rather than a form of male oppression. This argument is entirely unfounded, as explained by Pinar Ilkkaracan's article, "Women, Sexuality, and Social Change in the Middle East and the Maghreb". Ilkkaracan asserts that "the Qur'an does not mention female or male circumcision" (Ilkkaracan 758). Female genital mutilation is attributed to Islam out of Western ignorance. Ilkkaracan explains that it is often strongly associated with Islam because *some* African Muslim communities cite religion as the reason for performing it, and because Westerners have mistakenly related FGM to Islam'" (Ilkkaracan 758). Female genital mutilation, while a major violation of human rights in the Middle East, is not the only form of physical abuse women endure.

Human trafficking, an issue throughout the world, is especially prevalent in the Middle East, where women and their bodies are often bought and sold through the practice of sex slavery. These trafficked women are quite literally property, no more human than a pet, in the

eyes of their oppressors. These women are simply "instruments of production and enjoyment, not only for satisfying sexual desires and producing children, but also as property that can be inherited or disposed of at will" (Jiagge 42). These women are no longer in control of their own bodies, nor their own existences. Firdaus, in *Women at Point Zero*, finds herself in the dark world of prostitution. She ponders "How many were the years of my life that went by before my body, and myself became really mine, to do with them as I wished?" (El Saadawi 74). Countless women in the Middle East and have been silenced because they have lost possession of their own bodies.

Firdaus, however, manages to turn her life of prostitution from that which oppressed her to one which she has control. Firdaus first realizes that she has the power to make her own choices and stand up for herself when she is offered a choice between oranges or tangerines. She has difficulty answering, not because the decision is difficult for her, but because she "had never thought whether [she] preferred oranges to tangerines, or tangerines to oranges" (El Saadawi 50). This is consequential because Firdaus realizes that her wants, her desires and opinions do have merit. She has the power to make her own decisions and act as an individual, even if her environment tries to curb her rights as an individual woman.

Firdaus, throughout the rest of the novel, builds on the realization that she has the ability to make her own decisions. She turns her life as a prostitute, an occupation typically associated with female oppression, into an occupation where she holds control over her male clients. Firdaus doesn't view herself as a "prostitute in the full sense of the word" because from time to time she says "no" to clients (El Saadawi 97). Firdaus explains that this is part of what allowed her the power she held over her male clients: "A man cannot stand being rejected by a woman, because deep down inside he feels a rejection of himself" (El Saadawi 97). In the society Firdaus

lives, women do not reject men. Men are thought to exercise complete control over women, especially those employed as prostitutes. A man who is refused by a woman has his masculinity, his position of power, called into question.

Firdaus turns her body to her advantage when dealing with men and the mid-twentieth-century Egyptian society in which she lives. According to Therese Saliba in her essay "On The Bodies Of Third World Women: Cultural Impurity, Prostitution, And Other Nervous Conditions", Firdaus refuses "to prostitute herself to state 'interests" (Saliba 131). Firdaus, in effect, extends the control of her body to an act of rebellion against the state" (Saliba131). Firdaus further illustrates her defiance of her profession by charging high prices for the service of her body and rejecting men at her own discretion. Firdaus spends time as an office worker, but eventually leaves the position. She realizes that she "had been looked upon with more respect, and valued more highly than all the female employees" (El Saadawi 81). In this moment, Firdaus understands that the female body she has been persecuted for is also her greatest asset. Firdaus, after she leaves her job in an office, no longer allows her body to be taken advantage of. Instead, she makes the best of her situation and uses her body to command respect. Insightfully, Firdaus comes to understand that "all of us [women] were prostitutes who sold themselves at varying prices" (El Saadawi 83). Firdaus' insight is quite telling of her society: men have the power and use women as they please, regardless of occupation or place in society.

Firdaus' rebellion is unusual in her line of work, but her life of prostitution is all too common in the region. Of nations in the Middle East, Israel is the only nation with reliable data estimating the number of women involved in human trafficking, with an estimated 3,000 women trafficked yearly, according to Israel's Parliamentary Investigation Committee on Trafficking of Women (Calandruccio 287).Though indisputably an issue throughout the Middle East "for all

other countries in the region, even guesstimates are hard to come by" (Calandruccio 287). Prostitutes are generally viewed quite lowly by Muslims, as Abdessamed Dialmy explains in "Sexuality and Islam": prostitutes are viewed not only as women who sell themselves for sex, but more importantly, someone who "gave themselves over entirely" before marriage (Dialmy 164). Prostitution in the Middle East is a business of deceit. According to Calandruccio's "A Review of Recent Research on Human Trafficking in the Middle East", it is estimated that about 70% of women recruited to be prostitutes in the Middle East are aware they'll be selling their bodies for sex, though they are often deceived about the conditions they'll be working in. The other 30% are bluntly deceived and have no idea they'll end up as prostitutes. (Calandruccio 276). These women are unable to escape this life of prostitution. According to Calandruccio, these women are often intimidated, repeatedly raped, and have their migratory papers confiscated (Calandruccio 280). These women, "since they have no knowledge of their rights and no knowledge of the language, are afraid to do any move that might put them in a harsher situation" (Calandruccio 280). Some are locked in private residences in terrible conditions, while others are trafficked between brothels until they are deemed to be too great of a liability and are turned over to the police (Calandruccio 280). These women are often legally persecuted for an occupation which they had no choice in. Human trafficking is an issue of modern slavery: these women are trapped in situations they cannot escape and treated as sub-human. For those women who aren't trafficked, oppressors have other methods of using the female body to curb women's rights.

In many areas of North Africa and the Middle East, women have their rights infringed by forced veiling. These women are compelled, if not by law, by social pressures, to wear a veil in the name of modesty. In Djebar's *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, women have rights over their own bodies seized by social pressures to wear a veil.When the post-pubescent narrator is

attending school, a mother asks the narrator's mother "'Doesn't your child wear a veil yet?'", to which the narrator's mother replies "'She reads!'" (Djebar 179). The narrator, fortunately, has parents willing to stand up for her rights. Many young Algerian women of this time period are not so lucky. According to Fereydoun Hoveyda in her essay "Arab Women and the Future of the Middle East", as of 2005, approximately only one out of every two Arab woman are literate (Hoyveda 420). Past puberty, the narrator, among many other Arab women, are forced to wear a veil and removed from school. In fact, in *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, the narrator notes that while she is allowed to continue her education, the baker's daughter was "certainly veiled, withdrawn overnight from school: betrayed by her figure" (Djebar 183). These women's oppressors are denying them an education – possibly the most important component to breaking the cycle of abuse.

Contentions have arisen, however, over whether the veil is a symbol of female oppression or whether it symbolizes female independence. Perceptions of what the veil symbolizes are mixed and constantly changing. Ilene Prusher, in the August 2000 issue of the *Christian Science Monitor*, explains that women throwing off the veil, "which might have been met with applause 25 years ago, now seem to arouse more contempt and calls for an end to emulation of the West" (Prusher 8). Many Islamic women find themselves forced to decide between their identity as a female and their cultural identity as a Muslim. "Some women," according to sociologists R. Ray and A.C. Korteweg in *Women's Movements in the Third World: Identity, Mobilization, and Autonomy*, "resolve this dilemma by adopting the veil, where the veil can suggest both conformist and feminist meanings" (Korteweg, A.C. and R. Ray 51). The choice to wear or not wear the veil is, today, a decision fraught with social and political implications. The decision "is multifaceted," Prusher explains, "often meaning very different things in different countries. In

some places, it is social insurance; in others, quiet political protest" (Prusher 8). In some areas of the world, a veiled woman may indicate a woman using her body to express rebellion rather than one being repressed. The veil today has, in some areas, come to symbolize freedom for women, "not just from the tyranny of Western culture but also from unwanted sexual advances" (Beyer, Dowell, and Evans 37). Women are, in this way, turning a bodily covering that used to be used to oppress them into one which frees them from that oppression.

In the end, a woman's motivation behind her wearing or not wearing the veil determines whether the traditional head covering is a form of oppression or rebellion. If a woman is forced to wear the veil, or feels trapped or dehumanized by it, the veil can indicate repression. If a woman wears the veil to assert her independence, to reject Western culture, or because she feels that she better represents the face of Islam, the veil can be a symbol of female independence. Miriam Cooke, author of "Women in the Middle East", lists a woman's testing of the limits of the veil as one of the three best ways Middle Eastern women can resist their oppressors (Cooke 181). This, in conjunction with remaining visible in public and receiving an education, are powerful ways Middle Eastern women can express their independence (Cooke 181). The veil, and woman's motives behind wearing it or not, allow Middle Eastern women to make a statement about their rights.

The veil is only one example of a way Middle Eastern women have used their bodies as a means of expression. Arabic women commonly express their grief through lacerating their face with their fingernails. This seems reserved for periods of incredible emotional pain and mourning. For instance, in Djebar's *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, woman "lacerated themselves as signs of morning for husbands and sons who remained without sepulture on the field of battle" (Djebar 96). These women's self-laceration speaks more loudly than words, in

their culture, to the grief and sorrow they feel at the deaths of their husbands and sons. Later in the novel, an Algerian woman gives birth to a stillborn baby aboard a prisoners' ship headed to France. She expresses her grief by sobbing and readying herself to lacerate her cheeks (Djebar 190). Self-laceration allows Middle Eastern women to express their deepest anguish through the language of their body.

Women are also able to express their independence and deep feelings for another through marriage, provided the decision to marry is made freely by bother parties. When a woman gives her body to her husband in a marriage that both parties have consented to, this is an expression of independence, rather than female oppression. Unfortunately, forced and arranged marriages do still occur around the world. According to Alexandra R. Zuffoletti, in conjunction with the University of Florida, there is a difference between an arranged marriage and a forced marriage – arranged marriages are those which parents choose their son or daughter's spouse with some input from the two individuals to be married (Zuffoletti). If the two individuals to be married disagree with their parents' choice, their input is usually listened to, though parents will "often exert considerable pressure on their child to marry the person [the parents] have chosen" (Zuffoletti). The distinctions between an arranged marriage and a forced marriage are important: A forced marriage is a type of arranged marriage which is "rare, but in some parts of the world, such as the Middle East, and parts of Africa and Asia, it does exist" (Zuffoletti). If one of the individuals to be married resists the arrangement, "they will be punished, or sometimes, even killed" (Zuffoletti). Arranged marriage, regardless whether the marriage is forced or not, is a form of female oppression.

Firdaus, in *Women at Point Zero*, has her marriage arranged by her uncle whom she lives with. He sees the marriage as beneficial to both Firdaus and her potential husband Sheikh

Mahmoud. Her uncle welcomes the idea, stating "We will never find a better husband for her than Sheikh Mahmoud" (El Saadawi 38). Firdaus herself is extremely opposed to the marriage. Firdaus states "I do not…remember how I became Sheikh Mahmoud's wife" (El Saadawi 44). The age difference between Firdaus and Sheikh Mahmoud is astounding: She is only nineteen and he is well over sixty (El Saadawi 45). Firdaus is treated as a sex object and beaten by a man that she was forced to marry, what is supposedly a sacred union between two mutually committed individuals. Firdaus, through this forced marriage, has her body violated, her dignity violated, and her rights as a human being violated.

Women retaining control over their own bodies is critical to the advancement of women's rights in the Middle East. These rights are important, not only to the women whose rights are being trampled, but for the world. According to Hovyeda's essay, "Arab Women and the Future of the Middle East", the advancement of women's rights would favor greater stability in the region, be a blow to Islamic extremism, and allow America greater national security (Hoyveda 420). The issue, however, is one deeply rooted in Arabic culture. Hoyveda explains that governments often join forces with religious clerics in their oppression of women's rights, especially women's sexual autonomy (Hoyveda 422). Women attaining their rights in these areas will be a difficult battle – they often face religious, socio-cultural, and legal oppression of their rights. Feryal Cherif, in her essay "Women's Rights Reform in Muslim Countries," argue that leaders in Muslim countries often "preserve patriarchal interpretations of Islamic law to build legitimacy and help maintain power" (Cherif 1149). In order to preserve themselves, these leaders highlight tenets of Islam which privilege men, and women don't dare question. In many areas of the Middle East, religiously-rooted laws often "treat both Christian and Muslim women essentially as legal minors under the eternal guardianship of their male family members"

(Hoyveda 422). Because of the extreme barriers women of this region face to attaining rights to their own bodies, the United States has a responsibility to assist them in a culturally sensitive manner. This is in both these women's best interests and our best interests as a nation.

The United States should assist Middle Eastern women in realizing their worth as equal human beings. Hoyveda's essay suggests tactics for the United States to intervene on the side of these women. For instance, experts could train lawyers and police forces in the region to be sensitive to females and not turn away women who attempt to file complaints (Hoyveda 429). Without legal protection, and thus a statement of value from their country, women and their rights will continue to be trampled. Advising women on how to run a political campaign and the intricacies of holding public office would also be beneficial (Hoyveda 429).These women in public service could push for women's rights reforms with less Western influence. Additionally, Hoyveda adds, cultural exchanges would be beneficial. This could be achieved through professional exchange programs where Arab women would have the opportunity to experience life as a woman in the United States and American women could "also discuss the plight of women in their own countries" and have a chance to "understand the complexities of women's lives in the region" (Hoyveda 430). Such exchange programs would increase awareness in the United States of Middle Eastern women's plights and allow Middle Eastern women an opportunity to experience the rights they've been denied throughout their lives. The increased cultural awareness of both parties would undoubtedly further the cause of women's rights in the Middle East.

The female body is a powerful tool for communication. It can send a message of independence, of freedom from violence and oppression, and express a woman's deepest emotions. The body can also be brutally manipulated by women's oppressors in the Middle East

to keep women "in their place" in society. When the narrator in *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* is beginning her secondary education, she sees other females her age cloistered, their lives dictated for them simply by their sex. The baker's daughter's was one such victim: "Her swelling breasts, her slender legs, in a word, the emergence of her woman's personality transformed her into an incarcerated body" (Djebar 183). The narrator's use of the word "incarcerated" connotes this girl was imprisoned – her crime only that she is female.

All of us at Truman State have the opportunity to do what we wish with our lives. We are not imprisoned or discriminated against for our sex, our race, or our religion. Regardless of our gender, we have the opportunity to receive an education, to express our emotions freely, to dress as we choose, and to pursue our interests and respective career paths as we wish. These are not freedoms that all throughout the world have. Many women around the world, particularly in the Middle East, are denied control over their own lives simply because of their gender. They are refused police protection, refused marital rights, refused the right to participate in the affairs of their country, and conditioned to believe they have no power over their own existences. Their own bodies are used against them as a mode of repression. Fortunately, these women, such as Firdaus in *Women at Point Zero* and the narrator in *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, are also capable of using their body to stand up for their rights and expressing themselves through that body. In light of the plight of Middle Eastern women, we should all be thankful for the freedoms we enjoy and come to appreciate our bodies as valuable assets rather than a burden or liability.

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