

When British and Arab Novelists Teach Feminism: A Comparative Reading of Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi's Views

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Abstract To approach the problem of women's oppression internationally, this paper compares the ideas of two feminist canonical writers, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97) and Nawal El Saadawi (1931-). Despite the fact that Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi come from very dissimilar cultures, religions and epochs, they have tackled the issue of women's oppression, through their female heroines, in a strikingly similar way. Hence, principally through the application of the theories of both the American school of comparative literature and second wave feminism, the current study attempts to manifest how the respective authors have utilized the same techniques to expose the reality of the patriarchal social system and its direct role in women's oppression. It is concluded that the authors' socio-political contexts have influenced their writings considerably. The novelists have conveyed their own experiences through their writings to create an intimate text that in turn validated their stories. The paper also shows how El Saadawi's prose has been a feminist revolution in Arabic literature, similar to that of the 18th century English literature led by Wollstonecraft.

Key words Women's Oppression; Feminism; Comparative Literature; Mary Wollstonecraft; Nawal El Saadawi

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Introduction

Women from the remote ages and in most societies have suffered from oppression in terms of social, political, and economic discrimination. In spite of the numerous attempts by women to improve their circumstances, they, not only as married women but also as singles and the most pitiful female children, still experience manifold forms of oppression. This oppression is imposed upon them either by the domineering spirit of men in patriarchal society or by having to follow strict traditions and conventions which are often misused for the purpose of undermining their role. Almost in all societies, feminists, in an attempt to prove themselves, have striven to regain their extorted rights as human beings and citizens; their struggle has proved certain fruits, so far. Feminism has captured critics' attention due to its controversial theories which mismatch the traditions and conventions in most societies.

Some of the cognoscenti have had an avid advocacy in revolting against the traditions and conventions that grant absolute authority to men over women in the existing social system. In lieu of the bloody encountering, those people of distinction have invested the power of their pens as the only weapon to bring about the essential changes in the society. Ian Watt (2001), in *The Rise of the Novel*, states that the novel genre has bloomed in the early eighteenth century (47-48), and from that time on, authors have written many feminist works for the aim of improving women's conditions. However, the image of the female character that has been introduced by male writers in the novel, which is the most masculine of all genres in the eighteenth century (Poovey 111), is different, to a certain degree, from that introduced by female writers. Some male novelists did their best to write about women from a female perspective albeit they have not been very successful. As a result, some female writers have realized that it is their responsibility to convey the suffering of their sex in their words.

Undertaking fiction writing as their vital means to achieve the desired change, female novelists have declared the war against patriarchy (Bahadl-Khafajah et al. 6). One of the most enthusiastic leaders, the mother of feminism in the eighteenth century, is Wollstonecraft (1759-97). Because of the practiced oppression, represented by the strict traditions and conventions followed in the British society at that time, Wollstonecraft has been prompted to write in such controversial way in an attempt to engender some changes. Feminist related discourse and activities have begun to

cross the European borders and travel in all directions. Since women in most societies have suffered from patriarchy, the travelling feminist ideas have been warmly received everywhere, especially in the East. As the plight of women in the East is not less than that of their counterparts in the West, the adoption of feminist ideas has been natural. However, feminist ideologies would not have been adopted without the existence of the native demand.

To show how there has been an indigenous need to change the old fashioned way in which women are treated in eastern societies, especially in Egypt, the present paper illustrates how the feminist prose of the Egyptian writer Nawal El Saadawi (1931—) is similar to that of Mary Wollstonecraft. Drawing such comparison between the considered authors brings to the reader's mind the eighteenth-century feminist revolution; nonetheless, the present revived version of the revolution is led by an easterner (i.e. Nawal El Saadawi) in different place and time. Like Wollstonecraft, El Saadawi is a pioneer voice of feminism in Egypt and the Middle East (Abouzeid 537). She has been dubbed "Simone De Beauvoir of the Arab World" due to her very controversial writings .

Benefiting from the tenets of second wave feminism and comparative literature, this paper provides a close look at feminism, its second wave, its version in the Arab world and the originality of eastern feminism. Because the novels depict controversial ideas this study aims to shed light on the derisive views toward Wollstonecraft's *Maria*, or *The Wrongs of Woman* (1798) and Saadawi's *Imra'ah 'Inda Nuqtat al-Sifr* (1973), translated into English as *Woman at Point Zero* (1983). The paper also compares some of the main concepts presented in the aforementioned novels, such as women's commodification, their extorted liberty, and enslavement in marriage, to show how El Saadawi's prose has been a feminist revolution in the Arab literary world of 20th century, similar to Wollstonecraft's revolt in the British literary world of 18th century.

Close Look at Feminism

Over the last three centuries, feminist ideas and debates have been introduced and, more or less constantly, elaborated. However, what feminism means or what it encompasses has been a complex question without a certain answer (Caine 2). Hence, encapsulating the concept of feminism in a single short definition is not an easy task, if not impossible. Feminist movements, in different parts of the globe, have passed through many historical periods with ramified thoughts and ideologies that each has given its own definition in accordance with its principles. Defining feminism, according to Offen (1988), must be preceded by some generally accepted

understanding of the term feminism. However, the best way to arrive at such understanding can be achieved through reflecting the “cumulative knowledge” people have acquired regarding the “socio-political change” in women’s lives and how they have been historically developed in divergent cultures (Offen 120).

Likewise, El Saadawi (1980) points out that “the situation and problems of women in contemporary human society are born of developments in history that made one class rule over another, and men dominate over women” (*The Hidden Face of Eve* i). However, neither the extent nor the nature of the feminist can be perceived without fair understanding of the changing social, political and economic conditions of women within both the family and the wider society. These changes were extremely complicated and diverse, “varying considerably according to social class, ethnic, and religious origin and regional location” (Caine 14). Therefore, exclusively deriving apprehension of feminism from a certain culture or a certain time and apply it as a general model, will never give a supple understanding that is applicable across all cultures and times (Offen 120). To speak effectively, pinning feminism down necessitates the presence of both historical and comparative backgrounds in order to come up with a dependable understanding.

Although there are many definitions compete to explain what feminism is, many, including feminist activists, still have difficulties figuring out what exactly feminism means. It even happens sometimes that some people usually declare themselves as non-feminists while actually they are unconsciously feminists. The disability to realize their true attitudes is attributed to the lack of understanding the meaning of feminism. Obtaining intelligible clarification, as Offen (1988) puts it, is of great significance because feminist historians, theorists as well as those in other academic disciplines, who are concerned with feminist studies, are eagerly in need of a path to follow; they need a framework on which they can rest what they are theorizing, tracing, claiming and interpreting (121-22).

In 1914, Marie Jenny Howe has outlined the accommodation of inner and outer aspects of women’s experience by describing the relationship between psychological, political, cultural, and economic changes. She has defined feminism as:

Woman’s struggle for freedom; its political phase is women’s wish to vote. Its economic phase is woman’s revaluation of outgrown customs and standards ... Feminism means more than a changed world. It means a changed psychology, the creation of a new consciousness. (Rowbotham 33-34)

The platform, upon which the feminist programme is based contains certain criteria. Bouten (1922) attempts to explain the criteria in four levels. 1) Physical enfranchisement claims that women are human beings who have the soul, will and responsibility which, in turn, grant them the absolute freedom from the domineering master and his whims. 2) Intellectual emancipation assumes that education of women is the only issue that enables them to use their minds reasonably which results in putting them on the same level with men. 3) Moral emancipation is to accredit women, who have a soul, of the same quality and value to that of men, with moral duties and responsibilities, which are partly determined by considerations of sex. 4) Social emancipation, which is considered as a direct result of what has preceded, constitutes the basic ideas of utter equality between men and women concerning social and political matters (Bouten 2-3). However feminism, in its beginnings, was mainly concerned with women's political and legal rights; and such concern has become only a small part of what feminism tries to achieve in the present day (Caine 2).

Second Wave Feminism

Towards the end of the 1960s, second wave feminism has emerged out of the leftist movements that have rejected reducing women as second-class citizens in the United States, Britain, and Europe (De Clercq 15). For Nicholson (1997), second wave feminism is an important event occurred in the 1960s which is still spinning itself out; that occurrence was a "new intensity in many societies in the degree of reflection given to gender relations" (1). The concern of the second wave feminism is to oppose any kind of oppression exercised by men against women and to ensure social equality between sexes through debilitating the patriarchal social system. Moreover, second wave feminism examines the way wherein patriarchal features are presented in any literary or cultural production and how these masculine characteristics are directed to "reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women (Tyson 83).

As there have been two contradictory streams, each with distinct sets of beliefs has become a part of the general culture. Firstly, "the differences between women and men were deep and rooted in nature and, secondly, that women and men were basically the same" (Nicholson 3). Second wave feminism has been hailed "for the removal of the social barriers that had constrained women's lives" (De Clercq 16). Therefore, the ultimate goal of second wave feminism is to achieve social justice that provides all citizens with equal opportunities to develop, express, and exercise their potential as humans, regardless of their sex.

The groundwork of the radical second wave feminism has been laid by Virginia Woolf's (1929) *A Room of One's Own* and Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) *The Second Sex* by proposing the notion of "apparent distinction between sex and gender." Other influential works of the movement are Kate Millett's (1969) *Sexual Politics* and Shulamith Firestone's (1970) *The Dialect of Sex* (De Clercq 16). To establish the social justice within a system that "draws its authority from the autocratic power exercised by the ruler of the state, and that of the father or the husband in the family" (El Saadawi, "A Daughter of Isis" 352), influential feminist works have been employed as a vital weapon in the Arab world. These works include: Assia Djebar's *Les Enfants du Nouveau Monde* (1962, *Children of the New World*, 2005), Nawal El Saadawi's *Al-Wajh al-'Ari* (1977), and Fatima Mernissi's *Le Harem Politique: Le Prophète et les Femmes* (1987, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, 1991).

Originality of Eastern Feminism

The emancipation of women in the Arab world was first voiced in 1928, when the pioneering Egyptian feminist leader, nationalist, and founder of the Egyptian Feminist Union Huda Shaarawi publically unveiled herself. She announced the commencement of war against conventions and traditions that kept women subjugated inferiors in the Arab society (Cooke "*Al-Dirasat Al-Ourpiya*" 568). Like the western first call of women's liberation in the eighteenth century, the movement of Arab feminism faced hostility and refusal as being an attempt to westernize Arab society as a result of the French and British colonialism. However, viewing Arab feminism as an imported product is a complete ignorance of the spontaneous change and the indigenous needs of the Arab society. Golley (2010) ascribes the birth of Arab feminism to "the struggle between the dying traditional, religious, feudal Ottoman way of life and the rising modern, secular, capitalist European ways of life" (27).

Golley (2010) lists three fashions that have outlined Arab feminism. First, there was a movement that called for Islamic and social reforms, and claiming for women's rights was part of that general campaign to improve Islamic societies. Second, in an attempt to achieve democracy and social liberation, men and women of letters, of the national bourgeoisie and the petit-bourgeoisie, have been the first to call for women's emancipation. Third, Arab feminism considered the continuation of the plight of double struggle represented internally by standing against old social, economic and religious regulations, and externally by the reformists' struggle for identity, as they had to resist the very ideals of modern European, on which they

have founded their movement (27).

The birth and institutionalization of Arab feminism has emerged from a “coalescence in solidarity around a nationalist cause, the Palestine cause”; however, its development was, in part, due to the limitations of international feminism (Badran 240). In the literary domain, the Arab world witnessed an uprising against male literary writings in the second half of the twentieth century (Bahadl-Khafajah et al. 6). This rebellion was triggered by national and global developments in feminist movements which aim to “subvert and deconstruct male-oriented genres deeply rooted in a macho culture and reinforced by androcentric traditions” (Gohar 175). The major transition in female’s conditions, in Egypt and other parts in the Arab world, has finally come as a result of the ruthless efforts of Arab feminists, particularly Nawal El Saadawi. In Sherifa Zuhur’s (2001) words, “the last century witnessed women’s transition . . . from the harem to corporate and governmental offices,” and such transition coincided with an overwhelming feminist awaking and an enormous corpus of “serious literature dealing with gender issues” (78).

In a published interview with Nawal El Saadawi, she identifies the difficulties she undergoes in dealing with feminists from America and Europe. The essential issue that western and eastern feminists often disagree about is that western feminists fall short of understanding and conceptualizing the variety of religions, cultures, and politics in different countries, particularly in the East. Therefore, western feminists constantly try to dominate eastern feminists and dictate what they should or should not do. For instance, El Saadawi severely criticizes those American feminists who think that their feminism is the only valid version of feminism and that everything American serves as a model and is international (El Saadawi & Wilmuth, 441; Golley 4). El Saadawi attributes her frequent quarrel with western feminists in the international conferences to such disagreements especially when an activist proposes an idea and urges the rest to adopt the same, regardless of their backgrounds. El Saadawi considers such acts as “another form of oppression and colonialism” which she calls “the colonialism of western feminists” (El Saadawi & Wilmuth, 441).

Every society has its own history and conventions which, in turn, inspire its people in all spheres of life. El Saadawi states, “we have a feminism that is original and not copied from the West” (El Saadawi & Wilmuth, 441). She assures that she has become a feminist not through reading western books, “I became a feminist without knowing English. I was inspired by our history” (El Saadawi & Wilmuth, 441). El Saadawi and her colleagues are inspired by the great women of their own history and apply their own native criteria to arrive at the finding of discrimination

against women (El Saadawi & Wilmuth, 441; Perry 66).

In the early 1970s, the Arab world has witnessed the advent of the overarching theories of Arab feminists, chiefly represented by the theories of the universally acclaimed feminist Nawal El Saadawi. Her controversial thoughts have resulted in a fierce campaign of criticism besides the threats of death she has received. Many critics, especially the conservative Muslims, like al-Afani (2009), have accused her of being atheist who antagonizes Allah and the Prophet (17). On the contrary, El Saadawi is an Islamic feminist who rigorously censures those who constantly try to steer the religion towards their own benefit in an attempt to maintain the dominance and power they currently hold. Anne Roald in description of El Saadawi states that she is a “rejectionist” who is engaged in reforming and reconstructing her religion (Cooke, “Women Claim Islam” 76).

The most permanent points El Saadawi (1977b) highlights in her influential book *Al-Wajh al-'Ari lil-Mar'a al-'Arabiyya* are: 1) Not only has the Islamic or Arab culture had treated woman as a commodity or a slave, but also the western Christian culture has been even tougher in this regard. 2) Woman's oppression has nothing to do with East or West neither with religions; it is rather an immediate result of the patriarchal system in all human societies. 3) Woman's intellectual ability is not inferior to man's, as many think; history tells that woman has preceded man in thinking since she is the first who has used knowledge. 4) Woman has had rights in the time of Prophet Mohammed, yet, they have been extorted from her later. 5) Islamic Arab tradition has many positive aspects which should be looked for while negative aspects should be bravely left, because woman's freedom primarily depends on the combination of old and present positives. 6) Women can be emancipated only by becoming a political power which cannot be achieved without being aware of their own rights and goals (El Saadawi, “Al-Wajh Al-'Ari” 4-5).

Wollstonecraft's and El Saadawi's Political Activism

Mary Wollstonecraft worked so faithfully to serve humanity in general and women in particular. Nevertheless, she has been subjected to a severe chastisement in return (Pennell 1). Although the sexual freedom which Wollstonecraft experienced in her life “influenced men of the French Revolution on the subject of women's rights” (Agustín 133), by the end of the century a loud chorus of condemnation reverberated through Wollstonecraft's “intellectual reputation as well as her personal character” (Taylor 247). Her radical feminist ideas, however, were transferred into “libertine propaganda” (Taylor 247). Consequently, Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, however, was received with shock, horror, and derision when it was first

published early in 1792 (Janes 293). Due to her controversial ideas, Wollstonecraft has been ridiculed and dubbed with various epithets.

Horace Walpole's epithet in which he called her "a hyena in petticoats" has been the most notorious one (Johnson 1). Richard Polwhele went even further to "index her under 'P' for prostitute" (Johnson 1). The Reverend Polwhele in *The Unsex'd Females* (1798), provides his own criticism against Wollstonecraft. He considers her early death in childbirth as "a judgment against her perverted femininity and against the philosophy of her life" (Todd, "Annotated Bibliography" xiv). Twentieth-century critics such as Richard Cobb, Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham supported the ideas of Polwhele as well. Cobb accused Wollstonecraft of "malevolence and social destructiveness" (Todd, "Annotated Bibliography" xiv), while Lundberg and Farnham (1947) also accused her of "perverted sexuality" (941-44).

Like Polwhele, these twentieth-century critics were convinced that Wollstonecraft's premature death was "a culmination of a perverted attempt to turn people from the decencies of life (Todd, "Annotated Bibliography" xiv). In *Love, Morals and the Feminists*, Constance Rover (1970) also notes that Wollstonecraft's associations with Godwin and Imlay augmented the association between feminism and immorality in the public mind (14-17). The campaign of chastisement Wollstonecraft has received is essentially attributed to her feminist theories which she has spared no effort to promote. Her efforts to encourage females to be independent thinkers and to dissociate themselves from the feminine traits that keep them subjugated by males were regarded as sexual perversion in her age.

Marriage certificate, El Saadawi (2006) proposes, is no more than a contract by which women are legally possessed by men (El Saadawi, "Qadyat Al-Mara'a" 25). One of the contradictory concepts adopted by the patriarchal society which El Saadawi, like Wollstonecraft in her *Vindication of Woman* (Wollstonecraft, "Vindication" 203-04), severely criticizes is the duplicity in dealing with women's bodies. She argues that the commercial value of a female's body contradicts its moral and religious values. Where the female body is disrobed in advertisements and commercial promotions, it should be veiled according to religious and moral conventions (El Saadawi, "Qadyat Al-Mara'a" 30).

The other contradictory aspect, Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi agree on, is honor and women's chastity. Dishonorable deeds can be carried out by both men and women; nonetheless, the punishment is received only by women. Sometimes men are even proud of their illegal, immoral and irreligious sexual relationships (El Saadawi, "Al-Mara' Wa Al-Jins" 39-41). Moral principles, El Saadawi points out,

should be followed by all people regardless of their sex, color, or social class.

Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi have had a prodigious inclination for education from their early childhood at a time when education for females had been neglected (Faubert 13; El Saadawi, "The Hidden Face of Eve" 12; "Al-Mara' Wa Al-Jins" 39-41). Both have studied philosophy, medicine and history (Faubert 13; El Saadawi, "A feminist in the Arab world" 437; "Muthekarati Fi Sijin Al-Nisaa" 11; "The Hidden Face of Eve" 12), although Wollstonecraft was almost self-educated (Faubert 13; El Saadawi, "Muthekarati Fi Sijin Al-Nisaa" 11; "A feminist in the Arab world" 437). Delving into history, in particular, has offered Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi vast knowledge about women's high position in ancient societies and the rights they once enjoyed. Their awareness of such historical facts and their acquaintance with other sciences have consolidated their social and political activism whereby they struggle to restore women's extorted rights.

Living among oppressed people has given Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi an exact image of the reality of their societies which they have desperately wanted to improve. The aims they have set for themselves have kept them intimately attached to people whom they have defended. The circumstances under which these authors have lived in their early lives with their families have given them first-hand experience of several feminist matters about which they have later written. Such issues include sex discrimination and disrespect for females within both the micro (family) and the macro society, their lack of rational education, the dearth of decent jobs, and the trap for women that is marriage.

Because of their daring method of criticism and the controversial ideas they have propounded, especially in criticizing rules and traditions, Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi have been chastised fiercely and most of their works have been banned in an attempt by the authorities to prevent their works any effects they might have on society members, principally on women. However, these two writers have remained steadfast in their struggles against patriarchal system and its oppressive institutions. Their nonconformity has pushed them to lead tormenting lives in masculine societies that strictly follow traditions and conventions. They have combined their proficiency in writing with their awareness of the gender-based oppression to introduce subversive texts which have the potential to improve females' conditions.

Derisive Reception of *Maria* and *Woman at Point Zero*

Due to their critical impact upon feminist fiction writing, Wollstonecraft's *Maria* (1798) and Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1983) are briefly discussed in this section. A woman's wording is identified under the aegis of the reflection of her

experience in life, thereafter come her knowledge and beliefs. Such factors grant women's writings unique feminist features (Faubert 13). Tarabishi (2013), an influential Arab critic, also argues that the novel written by a male writer holds the world as its center, yet, it is self-centered when it is written by a female writer (Bishara 3-4). Thus, the constructing power of the male-authored novel comes in the first place while the female-authored novel notably derives its beauty from the richness of the passions and emotions (Tarabishi 13). Passions and emotions are usually referred to as the immediate consequences of humans' own experiences when they are in touch with their surroundings.

Women are usually associated with the lack of creativity (Tarabishi 13). Brockett (1870) claims that female writers have brilliant ability in describing any person or thing and narrating incidents; nonetheless, their fiction rarely involves a real creation or a character that is life-like and original (Reis 306). The claimed existence of such deficiency in females' creative productivity is not exclusively attributed to the intensity of emotions females pursue particularly in art and fiction writing (Brockett 90). Recent studies, however, have manifested that females' creative productivity is highly affected by the gender stereotyping throughout their lifetimes besides both "internal and external barriers in their education, marriage, and family lives" (Piirto 144).

Maria is an unfinished novel written by the well-known eighteenth-century British author Mary Wollstonecraft and published posthumously by her husband William Godwin. It tells the story of a woman who is wrongly incarcerated in an insane asylum by her abusive husband as she rebels against her disastrous marriage and the complete subjugation practiced by her husband. Maria, the protagonist of the novel, dramatizes marriage in European society as a prison in which women are sentenced for life (Wollstonecraft *Daughter of Isis* 184). In this novel, Wollstonecraft draws parallels between "domestic and political life, private and public morality" (Tone and Jon i). She also sheds light on the aspects that portray women as objects that exist only to gratify men's selfish caprices. *Maria* is an autobiographical novel through which Wollstonecraft probes the women's social, religious and political position as an ideal feminism (Ingham 223).

On the other hand, *Woman at Point Zero*, one of the most powerful works in Arabic literature (Palmer 1), is a novel written by the most controversial feminist Egyptian author Nawal El Saadawi. It revolves around Firdaus, the protagonist, and her gloomy story. In the presence of a female psychiatrist, Firdaus narrates her life story only one day before her execution as she is sentenced to death for killing a male pimp who has tried to subjugate her. She recounts her suffering as a child

in the village where her poor family has lived and the period she has spent in her uncle's house in the city, after being orphaned. To get rid of Firdaus, her uncle and his wife have planned to marry her off to an old abusive man, Sheik Mahmood. She continues to run away from her dwelling place to take prostitution as a job which finally leads her to prison. *Woman at Point Zero* explicitly unveils issues of women's struggle against an unfair patriarchal social system and conventions that reinforce inequality between sexes. Such explorations, in turn, make the novel worthy of such great reputation (Palmer 1).

Both *Maria* and *Woman at Point Zero*, have faced heated rejection not just because they were penned by female authors but also because of their controversial ideas. Harriet Jump (1994) maintains that *Maria* "cannot be called anything but a failure as it stands" and judges it as being "didactic" (Reis 306). Jones (2005) states that *Maria* is notorious for its explicit comments on sex education (145, 32). However, more than explicit sex education, Wollstonecraft challenged the dogma that loving the husband is wife's duty. In a letter to her daughter, Maria, the protagonist, justifies her decision to leave her brutal husband:

Those who support a system of what I term false refinement ... will not allow a great part of love in the female, as well as male breast, to spring in some respects involuntarily. ... To such observers I have nothing to say, any more than to the moralists, who insist that women ought to, and can love their husbands, because it is their duty. (Wollstonecraft "Maria" 74)

While in the courtroom where George Venables, Maria's husband, sued his wife's lover for seduction and claimed damages for the loss of her domestic services, Maria asserts her right to sexual autonomy, "in the heart of misery, I met the man charged with seducing me. We became attached – I deemed, and shall ever deem, myself free" (Wollstonecraft "Maria" 83). Todd (1995) points out that Wollstonecraft was considered as "one who at best encouraged other women to live in the fantasy of books rather than face the bracing realities of material life" (Wollstonecraft "Maria" 119). Wollstonecraft's radical feminist ideas introduced in *Maria*, however, have been considered libertine propaganda (Todd 153). Like Wollstonecraft's, El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* is looked at as an invitation, encouragement and justification for prostitution and immorality.

El Saadawi has been attacked by an overwhelming number of Arab critics, writers and other influential figures. She has been chastised for everything from her writing style to her thoughts which, in some degree, resemble that of the western

feminists' (Taylor 247). In *Tah't Shamss al Fikr* (Under the Sun of the Intellect), Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (1982) maintains that the woman is the blooming and fragrant flower in the garden of human's life; nonetheless, it has thorns as well (Saiti and Salti 172). Upon analyzing *Woman at Point Zero*, Tarabishi (2013) concentrates on the negative aspects that characterize both El Saadawi and her protagonist, Firdaus. He argues that El Saadawi's endeavor to bind herself to Firdaus is not to add more credibility to her novel. It rather shows the author's own yearning to be associated with a criminal prostitute (233). El Saadawi, as the narrator of the story, comments on the close bond between herself and her heroine:

All my attempts to see Firdaus were of no avail. I felt somehow that my research was now in jeopardy. As a matter of fact, my whole life seemed to be threatened with failure. My self-confidence began to be badly shaken, and I went through difficult moments. It looked to me as though this woman who had killed a human being, and was shortly to be killed herself, was a much better person than I. Compared to her, I was nothing but a small insect crawling upon the land amidst millions of other insects. (Tarabishi 267-70)

Keeping in mind the above mentioned limitations and the fierce censure their novels have received, it seems that not only Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi's lives are distinctive but they also have distinguished creative genius in propagating feminism. *Maria* and *Woman at Point Zero* have conveyed theories of feminist politics, which Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi have developed in most of their works. In the feminist politics theories, they have interrogated the "anti-feminist hegemony" which is empowered by religion and reinforced by male writers (Gohar 174-75; Wollstonecraft, "vindication" 87). They have proved themselves to their most influential contemporary male authors, such as Rousseau and Gregory in the eighteenth century in the West (El Saadawi, "Nuqtat Al-Sifr" 4) and Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, Naguib Mahfouz and Tayyeb Saleh in the twentieth century in the East (Wollstonecraft, "vindication" 87).

They have presented themselves as impartial rationalists who are eligible to compete with men for recognition of their literary genius (Gohar 174-75). As feminism has been mainly concerned with reflecting the real condition of women in a patriarchal society, Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi, through their selected novels, mirror the situation in which women are portrayed as the objects of men's desires (Rich 88; Todd 153). They actually reflect the idealized construction of patriarchal values according to their viewpoints. To put it differently, their writings allow the

patriarchal society to observe how dark the real male image may be reflected in women's writing. Apparently, Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi's distinctive styles of fiction-writing are replete with gloomy self-expression. They adopt such a style of writing as a weapon through which they can confront women's oppressor, namely the patriarchal social system.

Conclusion

Keeping the aforementioned views in mind, it seems that underpinning feminism necessitates an apprehension of both historical and comparative backgrounds (Wollstonecraft, "Vindication" 84; El Saadawi, "The hidden face of Eve" 88). It is also necessary to employ the tenets of comparative literature. What makes the parallelism in comparative literature more appropriate is that it draws on the similar social and historical evolution of humanity, which means harmony in the process of literary development (Offen 120). By considering the social, political, and economic aspects of individuals' lives, comparative literature contributes a comprehensive understanding of the motives behind each individual's behavior.

So comparing females' conditions in different cultures and epochs, El Saadawi (2007) concludes that women's plight does not belong to the Arab, Middle Eastern or the Third World societies only; it rather constitutes an essential part of the social, political, economic and cultural system followed in almost all societies from the ancient times up to the present day (Enani 42). The contemporary women's misery is a sequence of the old social systems based on "dominating-dominated relationship between classes (races) and sexes" (El Saadawi, i). Royer (2001) explicates that reading El Saadawi's works within the history of Arab feminism, activism and humanism enables the reader, particularly in the West, to dispel the stereotypes that regard Anglo-American feminism the model for worldwide feminism from a Eurocentric perspective (El Saadawi, "The hidden face of Eve" i).

In the same fashion, comparing two of the radical feminist works both in the West and the East (i.e., *Maria* and *Woman at Point Zero*) contributes a broad understanding of the real indigenous motives that stand behind each feminism. Pinpointing the distinctive motives of each feminism, in turn, dispels the belief that eastern feminism is only imitating the western model. Notwithstanding eastern feminism is a homegrown demand, it cannot be ideologically detached from western feminism. The ideological shifts that take place in the western society have an undeniable influence on the eastern part of the world in one way or another. Such influence, consequently, impels many eastern intellectuals to (re)examine women's condition as well as feminist discourse in their native societies.

The type of fiction Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi have introduced to propagate their feminist ideas, invests their daily struggles for survival. They convey their own experiences through their writings to create an intimate text that can be felt by many readers. Additionally, the novels under consideration do not examine the miseries of individual heroines; they rather touch the social, political, cultural and economic spheres of women's lives in general. Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi believe in the power that the novel has in influencing the reader; and that is why they re-introduce their theories and thoughts in their fictional works. In the author's preface to *Maria*, Wollstonecraft mentions that in writing this novel, she has rather attempted to portray "passions" rather than "manners" (Royer v).

In reading a novel penned by either Wollstonecraft or El Saadawi, the reader will not fail to sense the plight the authors have as they write. The passions and depths of the novelists' own reactions to their lives represent all the essential ingredients of their dramatic fictions. However, Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi's power to fascinate has not only been attributed to the effectiveness of the incidents that shaped their writings, but also to the impassioned way they demand social justice and impartial categorization. Despite the fact that feminism has been nascent in their place and time, Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi have strongly responded to this movement or, more accurately, they have led feminism through their theoretical and fictional writings.

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