

Unfettered Minds in Prison and Exile in Assia Djebar's *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* and Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*

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Abstract One outstanding issue in African literature is prison and exile writings. In such literary works, freedom, prison and exile have different interpretations and symbolism, especially in relation to female writers. Accordingly, the research seeks to show the symbolism of prison and exile in Assia Djebar's *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* and Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*. Albeit the selected works exhibit restrained bodies either in prison or exile, the study sheds light on the unfettered minds of Djebar's and El Saadawi's characters. It focuses on the positive side of both prison and exile. The analysis unravels that the real meaning of prison or exile, for women, like Sarah, Nadjia and Aicha in Djebar's texts and Firdaus in El Saadawi's novel, goes beyond the confines of its space. Despite the fact that women are imprisoned or exiled, they are free from the social shackles, while other free women are imprisoned or exiled by abiding to social conventions. Thus, the internalized prison is the most atrocious experience and the true exile is living in the past and accepting social practices. For Djebar's and El Saadawi's characters, prison or exile is regarded as a room of one's own to ponder about the true meaning of freedom.

Keywords Exile; freedom; prison; social conventions; symbolism

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Introduction

Freedom is a precious and sacred matter for everyone. It is celebrated by a

myriad of authors in English and non-English languages. All people are eager to reach it over many years and all over the world: East, West and Middle East and African people are no exception. Many African authors complain about their communities' miserable situations during the European colonization as well as in post-colonial era. However, their writings led to their boycott, persecution, incarceration, death and exile. Hence, among the prominent topics in African literature is prison and exile. Yet, the meanings of prison and exile are not merely limited to the common sense of both places with their conventional definitions related to political views. In relation to female authors, prison and exile have another symbolism. They are related to social shackles that suffocate women. Thus, from an analytical perspective, the present study seeks to unravel the symbolism of prison and exile in Assia Djebar's *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* and Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*. It casts light on the freedom of the female characters' minds to escape social imprisonments and exile in the selected oeuvres.

Theoretical Background

In general, prison and exile are confinements linked to politics and political views. They are regarded as places of alienation and outcast. However, they have other interpretations and symbolism. They are not merely places of nightmarish experiences. They can be a cradle of creation and in-depth reasoning about social and existential matter.

Starting by prison, it is related to atrocious experiences; however, the present research highlights its positive side as a place of inspiration. Lehlohonolo Moagi, a political fighter from South Africa, says: "The mind is at its peak behind bars. Solitary confinement unearths some pure depth of thought, hidden beneath layers of vague existential contradictions. In jail you develop faith in reason, human knowledge and wisdom becomes a religion. Time is at your disposal. You interrogate appalling fallacies of modern thought" (qtd. in Nagel 72). In this case, prison provides a positive environment for writers and intellectuals inasmuch as they are completely devoted to writing unlike their situation in their usual life. Furthermore, for Barbara Harlow, "the site of political prison" is regarded as a "'university' for the resistance" (*Barred* 5). Hence, prison is an essential stage in political resistance, especially in Africa. In the same vein, Ngugi wa Thiong'o also has a say in relation to the positive side of prison out of his personal experience. He opines: "Cell 16 would become for me what Virginia Woolf had called *A Room of One's Own* and which she

claimed was absolutely necessary for a writer. Mine was provided free by the Kenya government” (64). Thus, prison is viewed from a positive perspective as a room of creation and thinking.

Apart from its connotation as a physical confinement, prison can also be spiritual. In relation to women’s rights, prison has a mental meaning because patriarchy is considered as a prison for women. In this case, many feminists call for the abolishment of mental prison. For Mechthild Nagel, “the outside may prove to be more imprisoning than the cell itself” (73). Accordingly, the physical cell of the prison extends to any place in the society that provides shackles to people’s freedom. For this reason, feminists promote women’s emancipation from the prison of patriarchal societies. Hammed Shahidian, an Iranian feminist, says: “feminism is a movement to abolish patriarchy, to protect human beings from being prisoners of fixed identities, to contribute towards a society in which individuals can fashion their lives free from economic, political, social and cultural constraints” (11-12). In other words, patriarchal practices generate mental prisons for women. Henceforth, feminists attack such prisons to get women’s freedom. In addition, Nawal El Saadawi, out of her personal experience as a prisoner, explains the meaning of prison in her introduction of her book, entitled *Memoirs from the Women’s Prison*, in the Arabic version by saying: “But the prison today is no longer a visible wall, prison has become something I breathe in the air, a siege around the mind and intangible and invisible control” (8). For her, mental prison is more problematic than the cell of prison. It is implemented in the patriarchal society to suffocate women’s thoughts and ideas.

Like prison, exile is not only limited to geographical isolation. A person can be exiled in his own country through psychological exile. For Edward Said, exile is “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted [...]. Like death, it has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family and geography” (“Reflections” 137-138). Furthermore, the feeling of estrangement is not only outside the land and home, but it can be within the same homeland. According to Edward Said in *Representations of the Intellectual*, “Exile is one of the saddest fates [...] it not only meant years of aimless wandering away from family and familiar places, but also meant being a sort of permanent outcast, someone who never felt at home, and was always at odds with the environment, inconsolable about the past, bitter about the present and the future” (47). Thus, the bitter experience of geographical exile can be extended to every person’s mind to be exiled within his own community and

inside the borders of his country.

In fact, many researches shed light on the negative consequences of exile on people. However, this research focuses on its positive aspects, particularly in relation to exiled women. Edward Said says: “the exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience” (“Reflections” 147). Thus, instead of being a curse, exile can be a blessing because a person goes beyond the confines of homes and barriers. In this case, it provides a new vision far away from the original homeland. Said ascertains: “Seeing ‘the entire world as a foreign land’ makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and his plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music- is contrapuntal” (“Reflections” 148). Accordingly, exile provides refugees with an external perspective to have various visions about their reality. Exile is not only a source of alienation. It can be a source of inspiration and new vision. Said says: “Exile [...] is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past [...]. Exiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people” (“Reflections” 140-141). Therefore, such a triumphant ideology can be a starting point for feminists.

Actually, Edward Said did not theorize about gender and exile. Yet, his ideas have been extended to postcolonial feminism to tackle the relationship between psychological exile and feminism. For Said, home is safety; however, exile is not inasmuch as “the achievement of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind for ever” (“Reflections” 137). Nevertheless, not all memories of home are linked to tenderness, like the case of feminists. Nawal El Saadawi, as an outstanding displaced feminist, says: “I live behind invisible walls and live in alienation and exile within the homeland” (8). As a feminist writer, she suffers from mental internal exile in her country and she was forced by the government to flee Egypt because of her ideas.

In fact, few studies tackle the relationship between feminism and exile. L.H.M. Ling, in her article “Said’s Exile: Strategic Insights for Postcolonial Feminists”, endeavors to extend Said’s meanings of exile to enrich postcolonial feminists’ strategies of liberation from the patriarchal system. For her, “Said

recognized only the Self's sexual fantasies about the Orientalised Other but he rarely extended these insights to gendered, sexualised power relations among Others or from Others to the self" (139). She views that Said's connotations of home as a place of love, tenderness and security as opposed to exile as a place of uncertainty, unsettlement and alienation are not adequate for feminist agenda. In other words, home can imprison women as a woman, wife, daughter, and sister, while exile can be a place of inspiration to reflect about the meaning of freedom. Ling says: "For feminists, memories of home may not be suffused with as much tenderness as suggested by Said [...]. Postcolonial feminists experience pain [...] when forced to leave home, especially when instigated by patriarchal, colonial power politics. But they may not find themselves in the same kind of suspension and liminality as defined by Said's exilic condition" (142). Feminists provide new perspectives to Said's dichotomies of home and exile. Thus, "women writers in exile do not just discover creativity and stimulation in exile but also a voice for *their* stories, *their* concerns, *their* dreams" (142). Exile can liberate feminists from the shackles of patriarchy. Accordingly, "the decision to become an exile could also be motivated by the politics of gender. Women who choose exile often do so in order to escape from oppressive nationalist, religious, and patriarchal discourses and laws" (Heitlinger qtd. in Zeliza 14). Yet, in what way these theoretical ideas about exile and prison are relevant to Assia Djebar's *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* and Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*?

The Analysis of Djebar's *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* and El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*

Among the female African authors who tackle the notions of prison and exile in relation to feminism are Assia Djebar and Nawal El Saadawi. They provide different novel perspectives to the conventional meanings of prison and exile to foster women's emancipation and freedom from patriarchal practices.

First, Assia Djebar, in her collection of short stories *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*, depicts different experiences of imprisoned and exiled female characters in pre and post-independent Algeria. The collection was first published in French, then translated into English. In the first short story, "Women of Algiers in Their Apartment", the protagonist Sarah, who was an ex-prisoner in Barberousse prison, views that the real prison for women is not the cell, but an internalized prison created by the patriarchal system. She narrates the story of her blueish scar and her days of imprisonment. Sarah also informs Anne about

her torture in prison, and her anguish when informed about the death of her mother while she was inside the prison.

However, instead of talking thoroughly about her real miserable experience in prison, Sarah speaks about her mother's imprisonment in patriarchal society. She says: "[Her mother] would be silent and work all day long. She never stopped. She'd scrub her kitchen; when everything was done, she'd soap down the flagstones, the walls, she'd air the mattresses, wash the blankets again. She'd polish and clean and scrub [...]. An obsession like any other, after all" (48). For Sarah, her mother is imprisoned inside her house by feminine mystique all the day. Furthermore, Sarah says: "Every evening when my father came home, my mother would arrive carrying a copper bowl full of hot water and she'd wash his feet" (49). Hence, all her life is dedicated to housework. Sarah speaks on behalf of her mother and all women. She wants to change traditional roles of women to be free outside their apartments.

By comparing herself to her mother, Sarah states: "I can go out all I want, lead my life one day at a time, improvising as I go and in whatever way I see fit really, try as I might to enjoy all my freedom" (50). Unlike her mother, she controls her life and is free to do whatever she wants without respecting the traditional patriarchal rules. She states: "Go to hell, you two! And yet I knew I would never in my life wash anything like that [...]. That's how my mother died: silently, following a simple chill" (49). Accordingly, she endorses feminist ideas of freedom and emancipation. In fact, the most outstanding feminist speech of Sarah is as follows:

For Arabic women I see only one single way to unblock everything: talk, talk without stopping, about yesterday and today, talk among ourselves, in all the women's quarters, the traditional ones as well as those in the housing projects. Talk among ourselves and look. Look outside, look outside the walls and the prisons! [...] The woman as look and the woman as voice [...] not the voice of female vocalists whom they imprison in their sugarsweet melodies [...] But the voice they've never heard, because many unknown and new things will occur before she's able to sing: the voice of sighs, of malice, of the sorrows of all the women they've kept walled in [...]. The voice that's searching in the opened tombs. (50)

Sarah refers to women's imprisonment of the voice and body. She spurs Arab women's freedom by getting outside their houses which are regarded as prisons.

She comments by saying: “[T]his is the moment that Ishmael will really wail in the desert: the walls torn down by us will continue to surround him alone!” (51). She aspires to push women to break the walls of patriarchal prison to let only men inside and disturb Ishmael as one of the icons of religion. Thus, in order to be outside their prison, women need to talk, speak and collaborate between themselves to repudiate patriarchal shackles.

Apart from the first short story, the idea of patriarchal prison is also present in “Day of Ramadhan”. Nfissa, in the shortest story of the collection, narrates her atrocious experience of imprisonment in France. In a family conversation, Nadjia, Nfissa’s sister, projects Nfissa’s incarceration to her real life in Algeria. She says: “You may have been imprisoned, but I too was in prison, right here, in this very house you think is so wonderful!” (121) Nadjia complains about her miserable situation inside her house which is considered as a prison, especially after her participation in the Algerian War of Independence. In fact, on one hand, women joined the war to liberate themselves from the French colonizers. On the other hand, they wanted to free themselves from patriarchal Algerian men. However, unlike their expectations, albeit they got their independence, they remain imprisoned in their private sphere because they live in patriarchal society. Rita Faulkner asserts that “the project of bringing past voices to light [...] is a liberating process, whether the walls be those of the prison or the harem” (853). In this regard, Algerian women suffer from both prisons: colonizers’ prisons and the confinements of patriarchal practices that suffocate women’s freedom. Katherine Gracki ascertains that:

These women fighters threw themselves into danger and bore wounds testifying to this instead of staying in their traditional place during the war. As a result of their courageousness, however, they found they had no place in a postwar society which preferred to repress the memory of their participation rather than face the difficult task of integrating this new type of woman into the social fabric. (836-837)

In fact, Djébar, through her female characters, advocates the destruction and elimination of walls of patriarchy to get women’s emancipation in post-war Algeria.

Like prison, exile in *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* has another connotation which is different from the conventional meaning. The story “There is No Exile” is about refugees in Tunisia in 1959. Aicha, the narrator, lives with her family in exile because of the Algerian War of Independence. While her

father conveys his ideas about their exile in Tunisia through saying that “there is no exile for any man loved by God” (72), Aicha thinks deeply about the meaning of true exile in relation to women’s position in Algeria. Albeit “[e]xile is a solitude experienced outside the group: the deviations felt at not being with others in the communal habitation” (“Reflections” 140), Aicha keeps thinking about Algerian women’s position. Nuruddin Farah says:

For me distance distills, ideas become clearer and better worth pursuing. [...]. One of the pleasures of living away from home is that you become the master of your destiny, you avoid the constraints and limitations of your past and, if need be, create an alternative life for yourself. That way everybody else becomes the other, and you the center of the universe. You are a community when you are away from home- the communal mind, remembering. Memory is active when you are in exile.

In this regard, exile is good to look from outside to see the situation clearly.

In the story, Aicha views that “there are those who forget or who simply sleep. And then there are those who keep bumping into the walls of the past. May God take pity on them! Those are the true exiles” (73). According to her, abiding to patriarchal practices that oppress women, integrating traditional and conventional views in women’s lives and living in the past are the true meanings of exile. For her, although she is exiled, her mind is free. She expresses feminist ideas and repudiates an arranged marriage by her family. Accordingly, exile helps her to see things clearly, especially in relation to feminist issues. In this regard,

Exile [...] has become a predominant factor in the reformulation of feminine identity of Maghrebian women[...]. These writers use exile to create new spaces of active agency for women disempowered by the triple patriarchal tyrannies of French colonialism, postcolonial authoritarianism, and religious fundamentalism [...] thereby turning exile into a ‘productive contradiction’ in which the mechanisms of alienation are transformed into mechanisms of liberation. (Chancy qtd. in Zeleza 15)

In this case, exile is helpful for women to diagnose the negative shackles of patriarchy and is regarded as a suitable atmosphere to ponder about women’s freedom. Consequently, exile and prison in Assia Djebar’s *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* go beyond their conventional meanings of space to extend to

psychological states to think thoroughly about the real meaning the freedom.

Like Djebbar's collection of short stories, Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* also portrays prison in a different way. The novel was first published in Arabic and then it was translated into English. In fact, the novel is based on a true encounter between El Saadawi, as a psychiatrist, and a prisoner, called Firdaus, in Qanatir [Bridges] prison. The story depicts the plight of Firdaus from her childhood to her adulthood in patriarchal society that forced her to become a prostitute. In the prison, while flashing back her life to El Saadawi, Firdaus thinks about the true meaning of life, especially a woman's life in patriarchal society. Albeit her body is fettered, her mind is unfettered and in its peak. Regardless of her profession as a prostitute, El Saadawi through Firdaus, transmits a feminist message to all women in patriarchal societies. Firdaus' story is "an allegory for women's struggle against patriarchy" (Coin 429) and *Woman at Point Zero* is "not merely a novel: it is a message of resistance for all women" (433). Thus, it can be said that her ideas about freedom concern all women. Fedwa Malti-Douglas also asserts: "Firdaus's narrative, presented on its own, permits her plight to become more universal. She is everywoman" (32). In this regard, Firdaus' ideas about freedom are relevant to every imprisoned woman by patriarchal practices.

Because of her family members' and husband's oppressions, she escaped from her house to be first forced to be a prostitute. Then, after comparing her life as a married woman and prostitute, she opts for prostitution. She proudly announces: "[B]ecause I was intelligent I preferred to be a free prostitute, rather than an enslaved wife" (124). Firdaus views that a prostitute has more advantages and freedom than married women who are imprisoned by social fetters. Firdaus states that "men force women to sell their bodies at a price, and the lowest paid body is that of a wife. All women are prostitutes of one kind or another" (124). For Firdaus, married women are oppressed by patriarchal practices. Kate Millet asserts the following: "[A] woman underwent-civil death upon marriage, forfeiting what amounted to every human right, as felons now do upon entering prison" (67). Hence, a married woman is like a prisoner. However, Firdaus enjoys her life "of being completely independent and living her independence completely, of enjoying freedom from any subjection to a man, to marriage, or to love; of being divorced from all limitations whether rooted in rules and laws in time or in the universe" (118). In this regard, Firdaus, in real prison, conveys a message to all women to think about their true freedom inasmuch as prison "narratives are actively engaged in a re-definition of the self

and the individual in terms of a collective enterprise and struggle. The prison memoirs [...] are not written for the sake of a 'book of one's own' rather they are collective documents, testimonies written by individuals to their common struggle" (Harlow, *Resistance* 120). Although her ideas are radical, Firdaus addresses all women to think about patriarchal practices to liberate themselves.

As a prostitute, she refuses the authority of men. She repudiates Marzouk's proposal to protect her inasmuch as each prostitute should have a pimp. After beating her severely, she killed him. Then, she says: "I want nothing. I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. Therefore I am free" (137). She feels very proud of her crime because she succeeds in keeping her freedom and breaking the barrier of fear. For Firdaus, "No woman can be a criminal. To be a criminal one must be a man [...] I am saying that you are criminals, all of you: the fathers, the uncles, the husbands, the pimps, the lawyers, the doctors, the journalists, and all men of all professions" (136-137). In this case, men, in any patriarchal society, are criminals because they oppress women.

As a result of her crime, she is condemned to death. Yet, for Firdaus, her condemnation is not because of her real crime. It is a punishment for her discovery of the patriarchal reality. She says: "They condemned me to death not because I had killed a man there are thousands of people being killed every day- but because they are afraid to let me alive. They know that as long as I am alive they will not be safe [...]. My life means their death. My death means their life" (137) and "men do not fear [her] knife. It is [her] truth which frightens them" (140). Firdaus' realization of truth about patriarchy is a threat to men. Firdaus breaks the barriers of patriarchy. She says: "I am free. For during life it is our wants, our hopes, our fears that enslave us. The freedom I enjoy fills them with anger" (137). For her, women are enslaved and imprisoned by fears and patriarchal practices. Therefore, although Firdaus is really imprisoned, she feels herself free, unlike free women outside the prison who are imprisoned by patriarchy.

Like prison, exile has different symbolism for El Saadawi. She was imprisoned by the Egyptian president Anwar Sadat because of her feminist and political views. Then, she was officially obliged to flee Egypt in 1988 to live and teach in different countries. She regards prison as a place of creation where she writes her book *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* through smuggling toilet paper and eyebrow pencil. Her book was published in 1983. In her book, she says about her country: "Here rebellion is a fault, here awareness is a sin, here knowledge is a sin, here a person enters prison in the dark without crime

and without investigation. Here, a person dies prematurely. Here, the mind is suffocated and talent and the courage of creativity are buried” (9). Thus, for her, people are imprisoned by their lack of consciousness. Although they are free in real life, their minds are imprisoned and there is a need to liberate them from such fallacies.

Regardless of figurative prison, real prison and exile are the punishment for many conscious activists who awaken people’s consciousness about freedom. In this regard, El Saadawi experienced prison and exile in her homeland and outside because of her ideas. Despite the fact that her ideas are radical, she encourages people, in general, and women, in particular, to free their minds from patriarchal practices. She says: “Each time our country went through difficult times, young men and women volunteered to fight or to serve in zones that were exposed to danger [...]. Once the crisis was over, these men and women, these heroes and freedom fighters, became criminals to be hunted down and put in prison or forced into exile” (El Saadawi *Walking* 59). Hence, imprisoned and exiled people pay the price of their consciousness. Yet, their prison and exile are fertile places to ponder about the true meaning of freedom.

In fact, albeit exile is regarded as a bad experience, it helps El Saadawi to express her ideas freely without censorship. She “has left Egypt under threat of death, and finds herself in the USA [...] .Saadawi has achieved a comfortable distance, a safe space from which to view the parts of her life in need of healing and repair” (xi). Hence, outside her country, El Saadawi can see her situation and women’s position in a crystal way. She celebrates her exile through writing. Rebecca Walker says: “*Walking through Fire* is Saadawi’s middle passage, her song of exile” (qtd. in El Saadawi *Walking* xi). Writing for El Saadawi is a sacred matter and she accentuates her writings in exile. She says: “After leaving Egypt I started to write. The threat of death seemed to give my life a new importance, made it worth writing about. I felt that the closer I moved towards death, the greater became the value of my life. Nothing can defeat death like writing” (*Walking* 3) and “through writing my self breathes, expresses itself. My pen breaks down the wall of isolation between my body and the world” (19). Thus, El Saadawi’s exile ostensibly seems as a bad experience, but it spurs her to express her feminist ideas to empower women. Therefore, exile and prison for El Saadawi have a positive meaning unlike their usual negative connotations.

Conclusion

The research sheds light on the positive side of both prison and exile by being

places of creation and innovation. They help prisoners and refugees to purify their ideas about freedom, especially in relation to women's position in society. Accordingly, the analysis vindicates that albeit female characters in Djébar's *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* and El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* suffer from incarceration, their minds are free from social shackles that confine other free women. Both authors spur women to ponder about the true meaning of freedom to liberate their minds and voices from social conventions. Thus, there is a need to decolonize the mind or to release the mind from mental social imprisonments. Yet, the analysis of the selected oeuvres is open to further future research.

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