



## Remapping Feminism in Egyptian World: Psychological and Existential Crisis of Female protagonist in Nawal El Saadawi's Novel "Searching"

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### ABSTRACT

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The psychoanalytical feminism explores the new dimensions that play vital role in defining feminine identity by challenging the traditional western epistemology. This lens renders a novel meaning to Saadawi's fictional work that depicts an Arabic woman who is struggling psychologically to find a meaning in the world. The author has depicted a realistic picture that is fragmented and alienated self of her female protagonist in her psychological fiction. Her protagonist seems to project her individual identity that is not linear rather it is a product of complicated interaction with different members of society from both genders. The views of traditional psychoanalytic theories are challenged that is phallogocentric. "Penis envy" is replaced by "womb envy" and identity configuration is driven by mother rather than father figure. This study is an attempt to analyze the individual voices of major and minor male and female characters from various range of societal background with their own ideological bearing. It also makes an effort to position these voices in dialogue with each other through which power dynamics are being challenged, exchange of ideas occurs, and marginalized members of society are being armored with the epistemological strategies to face structural inequalities. A dialogue occurs even between different discourses: tradition psychoanalysis that is male dominated and psychoanalytic feminism to deal with stereotypical gender configuration.

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## 1.0 Introduction

Psychoanalytic feminism is a field of study that relates feminist thought with psychoanalytical thought with the emphasis on the research how gender identity and inequality are defined by childhood experiences, unconscious processes, and family structure that play significant role in internalizing social norms leading to stereotyped gender role and patriarchal expectation. This discourse dissects gendered subjectivity that is the greatest means of oppression for women and reveals new “truths” of women’s experiences. It is not only considered an integral component of collective process in the main stream of feminism that deals with the minimal role of female agency in the production of sexual desire, social expectation and professional goals, but also carries a distinguished ‘epistemological discourse’ free of discursive boundaries of feminism and psychoanalysis. It cannot be homogenized with any of these discourses at individual level. It is an attempt to differentiate between anatomical sex and socially produced gender with the role of unconscious experiences and repressed impulses (Elliot, 1991).

Chodorow argues in *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978) that before capitalism the household was a complete unit in which labor division was fair enough. The rearing of child was the responsibility of both the mother and the father. The children were being provided with clothes, food, education, and religious teaching with the cooperation of both parents. After capitalism, family has become only a unit for reproduction, no productive work is done within household. Women’s mothering role has evolved as psychological and ideological task that defines their lives. As mother is responsible for the rearing of children, her relation with boys and girls defines gender identity that is deeply rooted in ideology of society. Girls identify themselves identical with their mothers and carry social responsibility of bearing and rearing the children. They have a relational sense of self because of their prolonged bond with their mother. On the other hand, boys’ identity is decided by their difference from their mother. They grow as independent, rational and autonomous being to do productive work. She claims that in order to foster more equal family dynamics, cultural conventions that attribute nurturing to women and independence to males must be resisted. Her object-relational theory defines the relation between the mother and daughter in terms of oedipal complex. As in case of Freudian Oedipal complex, the son has ambivalent relation with his father because of sexual desire for his mother, in the same way, in feminine oedipal complex the daughter has ambivalent attachment with her mother. She hates her mother’s engrossment in her father, at the same time she wants to be like her mother and goes for heterosexual relationship. She argues this feminine oedipal complex maintains gender inequality within culture.

Karen Horney (1942) criticizes Freud’s theory of penis envy and presents a concept of womb envy to challenge patriarchal gendered norms that are prevalent in society. She argues that man feels inferior to woman because of her reproductivity. He commits physical, economical and sexual violence on woman to fight with his sense of inferiority and to gain power over her. Luce Irigaray (1974) critiques Freud and Plato who see women as “other” to maintain their superiority complex, in her book *Speculum of the Other Woman*. She defines that sexuality in case of women is not singular entity but relational and multiple and explains it with the metaphor of “two lips” as

a rejection of phallogocentric notion of sexuality. She calls for new language that is not phallogocentric in nature and would not exclude female sexuality (Irigaray, 1991). Julia Kristeva (2024) differentiates between semiotic and symbolic diction that challenges symbolic order. She believes the abject, ugly things like bodily fluids, decay, or anything that makes it difficult to distinguish between self and other, is both appealing and revolting. This abject gives mother an ambivalent character, both submissive and creative at same time.

### **1.1 Research Objectives**

- To analyze the gender identity that is shaped by culture and family structure, in case of Fouada specifically by her teacher and mother, in the light of object relation theory.
- To study the connection between gender and knowledge that defines the plot of the novel and Fouada's character.
- To explore how Fouada struggles for authenticity for her existence by constant dialogue between her moral and scientific thinking, and her intellectual and sexual engagement with male characters.

### **1.2 Research Questions:**

- How Fouada does pass different stages of gender identity that is shaped by culture and family structures?
- What is the connection between knowledge and gender that defines the plot of the novel and Fouada's character?
- How does Fouada struggle for authenticity of her existence by constant dialogue between her moral and scientific thinking?

## **2.0 Literature Review**

The psychological perspective of female, character especially that belongs to the Islamic Arab world is often projected as fragmented. She suffers from emotional tolling under the influence of patriarchal values. She is portrayed as dependent, irrational and entangled in their emotional traumas. Despite of her emotional traumas she seems to define her intellectual and spiritual self and faces a world of moral ambiguity. All her struggles apparently are of no avail. Her rights are violated and she is marginalized and exploited physically and sexually as seen in Nawal El Saadawi's novels. Firdous in *Women at point Zero* is circumcised at early age, molested by her uncle sexually, tortured physically by her husband, exploited sexually many times. At the end, she abandons her struggle and resists by committing hideous crime. The whole narrative explores her fragmented psyche.

Then, there are Zeina and Bodour who are trying to survive through their intellectual pursuits to find authenticity and meaning in their lives. They are threatened by the society that is male dominated and is controlled by misinterpreted Islamic principles regarding to gender roles. In *The Fall of the Imam* (1987), there is a woman who is stoned to death as she is accused of sexual transgression. In this novel, religious ideology is treated as a tool to subjugate women. Zakeya in *God Dies by the Nile* experiences existential dilemmas and the prevalent religious discourse is unable to address her questions. All of these female characters in Saharawi's fiction are tormented physically and psychologically because of societal expectations that are the products of patriarchal

order. Their sexual agency is dismissed with various ideologies and their intellectual curiosity is misled by male characters that are the responsible of the social maintenance.

Her non-fictional works also highlights the inequality and injustice that are executed against women in Egypt. She depicts her own life of struggle, exile, and desires to fly, and the price she had to pay for her own intellectual and political choices, in her autobiographical works: *Waking through Fire* (2003) *A Daughter of Isis* (2024) and *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* (1994) presents a world of struggle ruled Islamic revivalist who speak for rights blessed by Allah Almighty and often are misinterpreted by men and by secular intellectuals who are striving to claim their mental faculties and sexuality. *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* (1977) deals with horrific experiences of women on the name of honour and religion as witnessed by the author.

Saadawi's works are often cited by the Islamic feminists and huge scholarship has been produced on the basis of her writings. Shehata's study (2021) explores women rights in her works and describes the dual nature of her theory. She states that Saadawi criticizes veil, polygamy, and other Islamic views as she considered them as tools of social and legal injustice. She also appreciated the era of Holy Prophet for fair and just treatment of women. Fedwa Malti-Douglas (1995) regards her fictional and non-fictional work as Polemic rather than pieces of literature and calls her radical feminist who is digging paradigms of violence against women by men who are gods in themselves and decide their fate as they please.

Mariyam Cooke (2010) reviews Saadawi's novel *Searching* and considers it as a narrative based on Fouada's psychological and physical search for happiness in her personal and professional life. She is an intelligent being who is enriched with knowledge of chemicals and is haunted by the fear of losing her creativity at Ministry. She regards this novel as the reminiscent of *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, in which a woman who desperately desires a man and respect. She is unable to make progress as a chemist and researcher as she is a woman. She is admired by her beauty and her intellectual pursuits are dismissed. She compares this novel with Naguib Mahfuz's novel *The Road* (1964), in which the man protagonist compromises on his spiritual being in order to find meaning in materialistic world.

### **3.0 Methodology**

This is a qualitative research based on Nawal el Saadawi's *Searching* (chosen as primary text) that is analyzed with the paradigms of psychoanalytical feministic lens to explore the unconscious, of the protagonist, with its repressed desires and internalized patriarchal norms that shape her identity. It is an attempt to search how Fouada passes through "mirror stage" and tries to recognize herself as a separate self with her feminine oedipal complex that rejects patriarchal dichotomies and phallogocentric subjectivity. It is to explore her language that she adopts by her mother and is a landmark of her identity.

Psychoanalytical feminism is intertwined with dialogism (Bakhtin, 2010), through which Fouada's voice engages with patriarchal discourses presented in the novel (Saati's voice, manager's ideology and Farid's idealism) and tries to be heard as she is a marginalized member of the society because of her gendered identity. This study will treat all voices as independent discourses with

diverse social and intellectual background in order to tackle with complex and multiple identities. The technique of intertextuality will be applied to compare Fouada's character to Firdous, the protagonist of *Women at Point Zero*.

#### **4.0 Findings and Results**

##### **4.1 Gender Identity is shaped by Culture and Family Structure**

Fouada is constantly in her pursuit to define herself. She defines her feminine identity with the objects that surrounds her physical world. Doane and Hodges (1992) state the objects refer to the persons with whom she is emotionally attached. Her mother is the only individual to whom she responds emotionally in the plot after Farid who is always absent physically. Her professional life is quite ambiguous and she barely has any interaction at her workplace. She is not engaged mentally and emotionally over there. She goes to the Ministry like robot. It is more like a prison or it is a metaphor for social institution ruled by males of the society that threatens her individual identity. She is more influenced by her mother subjectivity (Chodorow, 2023). Fouada has internalized the radical notions of her mother. After her father's death she is taught that she should devote herself to her studies as there is no use in man. This ideological resistance that the mother poses against society results in ambivalent feelings. Fouada loves and hates her mother at the same time. She is too much attached to her that struggles to see herself as an individual.

After her father's death she is sitting before mirror combing her hair. The mirror in her wardrobe she sometimes sees herself and tries to identify her physical features. Most of the time, she just combs her without looking at herself properly. This is the representation of metaphor of mirror stage. But she is not governed by the law of symbolic order and law of father that can marginalized her womanhood (Chodorow, 2023). Despite of this fact, she has internalized societal expectations and is forced to embrace her womanhood. She finds herself to resist to society as her mother wants. She is alienated to herself and objectified. She sees herself in the mirror as an object and is obsessed with beauty standards. She is a multiple self. Her description of her body is not aligned with feminist theory. She mentions her "two lips" as a metaphor of her feminine identity (Irigaray, 1985). The description of her face as longer, tall stature, long arms and legs, gives annotation of phallogocentric discourse. These "mirror scenes" in the plot are the moments of her empowerment where she faces the challenges and tries to define herself with new terms and tries to embrace her shortcomings and transform them, as her ugly lips that remains ajar. She tries to maintain the ugly gap between her lips. Saadawi reinterprets Lacan's idea to disclose the behaviors women's identities are designed by societal prospects, proposing ways for resisting alienation and reclaiming a more authentic sense of self (Irigaray, 1991) of her female protagonist.

She describes her eyes with the words of her absent lover Farid. She wakes up in the morning at looks into the mirror as if searching for something but is unable to find any words or meaning coming out. She remembers that her lover has found something novel in her eyes that he is unable to define. She sees her with the eyes of other. She is afraid of the blue eyes of the limbless foolish she has followed in her childhood. She is mesmerized with Farid brown eyes and shocked by uncertain eyes of the flat owner. She is always under the gaze of her mother's static eyes. All these gazes determine her relational identity that is in no way a linear one.

The author of the novel depicts a scene in which the young Fouada gets her period and is afraid of sharing it with her mother as it is something disgraceful. This confusion on the part of this young blurs the boundaries between her and other. She considers herself as something inferior or a wrong doer with her puberty. This self-conception with abject (Kristeva, 2024) is a challenge to her identity posed by societal norms. This pushes her to the liminal space that provokes severe reaction in the form of her fear. This is the stage where she stands separately from her mother (sterile mother). Now she herself is a woman who can reproduce and can enter in symbolic mother. This is what male dominated society demand from her and wants to control her by this. She can be labeled as “other” to the man. After that moment she becomes afraid of her womanhood and feels alienated from herself when she looks at her naked breasts in the mirror: “She was surprised one day when she saw her naked breasts in the mirror. There was no longer the smooth chest she was used to seeing but instead two peaks, tipped by two dark raisins, that rose and fell with every breath, that jumped when she jumped as though, were it not for that thin layer of skin, they would fall off like oranges fall from a tree.”(Saadawi, p. 80). The image in the mirror seems to be of another girl and she feels ashamed.

#### **4.2 Relation between her knowledge and Identity**

Fouada recognizes herself and the world with the terms taught by her mother. The course of her life is determined by the dreams of her mother. She is obsessed with the supplications that her mother says to Supreme Being for her success: “May the Lord make you successful, Fouada my daughter, and May you make a great discovery in chemistry’ (Saadawi, p16). She remains in constant fear of not fulfilling her mother’s hopes. She is afraid of losing that creative idea, in the ministry, that can revolutionized the world and can provide authenticity to her feministic epistemological narrative.

Her mother’s marriage was a failure. When she gave birth to Fouada, her husband was unhappy. She felt so heartbroken that she spent the whole night crying. Next morning, because of lack of care she got extremely ill and ended in becoming sterile. At that time, her husband was unable to control the productivity and left her alone with new bone baby girl as bearing and rearing are motherly responsibility. She took this rejection on her heart and prepares her daughter to resist the male ideology. Fouada’s mother is a representation as “good enough mother” (Winnicott, 1965). She provides care to the needs of her daughter. She struggles hard to get her educated. She supports her in accepting her womanhood when she is caught washing bedclothes with red stains on it. She supports her financially in setting her chemistry laboratory. She simultaneously tries to foster independence in her daughter by supporting all her decisions. Despite of all these deeds she is not a perfect mother. Her dogmatism that she has internalized in her daughter (Chodorow, 2023) has created some psychological distortions in the life of her daughter. She is in deeply in need of a man as her sexual agency demands. However, she cannot make commitment in the form of marriage to any man as her natural feelings are perverted by her mother. She has ambivalent relation with her mother. She loves her mother as she provides emotional support and sense of security. She hates her mother because of her high expectations and does not want to be a mother herself.

She is caught between the dilemmas of defining herself. She sees her body as through a lens of grandmother stories. She finds herself as strange as mythical characters. She sees the world as the projection of her mother's body. She describes the building of the ministry as the breast of her mother, cracked wall with lined face of her mother. She describes her mother as a book: "As she was going downstairs, she saw her mother open the peep-window in the door. Her pale face, criss-crossed with lines behind the narrow iron bars, looked like the creased and crumpled page of a book (Saadawi, p. 89). This book has lost authenticity and validation. She is a housewife who knows nothing about the world outside the four walls of her house. She lacks practical knowledge about the world.

What she has learned from her mother is not sufficient to deal with practical life. She sees her mother boiling her father's handkerchief to kill the germ without knowing what germs are. When the teacher asks from the class to tell what germs are. She confidently replies that germs are being found on my father's handkerchief. She becomes a subject of amusement because of her insufficient knowledge (Saadawi, p 17). She is overly dependent over her mother and ideology. She remains unaware of her body parts in the most part of her life. She is exploited sexually and financially by her lover as she is unable to read the character of this political activist. After his absence from her life, she finds unable to identify herself. She feels his fragrance within herself. She cannot differentiate herself from him. She roams and roams in nameless unknown streets in search of independent and individual identity. During his research in the streets, she is mistaken as a prostitute, as an object of pleasing man sexual desires but not accepted as an individual (De Beauvoir, 2014). In her intellectual pursuits in her laboratory, Fouada once again tries to discover "new truth" in the ovule of her mother.

#### **4.3 Existential Crisis: Dialogue between her moral and scientific self, and patriarchic Discourse**

After Farid's disappearance, Fouada comes across her existential crisis and exclaims many times "I am nothing" with acidic taste in her mouth. During her pilgrimages in the unknown lanes she ponders over her life, meaning of her life and his individuality in the cosmos. She reconsiders her freedom and challenges of authenticity created by social constraints. She is shocked by her sexual oppression in her personal life and intellectual exploitation and marginalization in professional life as a chemist. In patriarchal society, female lacks individual freedom and responsibility of creating meaning her own life as she is trapped in societal structures (Beauvoir, 2014). She lacks autonomy in life. Her sexual agency is controlled by her mother and lover. Her intellectual vigor is paralyzed by the system ruled by male members of society. She is not considered as an intellectual being with the capacity of doing some scientific research. She is constant struggle to live authentically in her true self without carrying burden of societal and her mother's expectations. She finds no meaning in her life. Her life is regulated by immanence, while she aspires for transcendence.

Saati tries to buy right to pass order to her by presenting diamond, in which she has no interest. He favors her by giving his apartment on minimum rate. He comes to see her and asserts her resemblance with his daughter. This resemblance hints at his "womb envy" (Horney, 1942).

He constantly tries to seek power over Fouada to overcome his ability to produce. He argues against her intellectual curiosity as he considers this irrelevant. After her mother's death he overcomes her sexuality and productivity by raping her and leaving his taste in her mouth. She cannot get rid of this taste despite of brushing and flossing hardly. Saati involvement in politics and research is symbolic of "creativity". Farid also suffers from this envy and takes revenge from her by disappearing as she considers her unable to corporate in his world of ideas.

She tries gain voice and agency of her own by "mimicking" as a tool of resistance. She seeks way to be passive member of society. She is always reluctant to get ready and go to the ministry. She uses her blanket as "transitional object" to bridge the gap between herself and the world outside (Winnicott, 1991). She sees herself in the light societal beauty standards. She is not interested in marriage, but behaves like a wife in her relation with Farid with all her artificiality. She seems to perform Irigaray's notion of mimicry as a strategy of interference, where she uses patriarchal language and symbols (long arms and legs) to destabilize authority. She accepts Saati's condolence and support to deal with her irreparable loss of her mother, as he expects.

## 5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

Nawal el Saadawi', who is considered as Simone de Beauvoir of Islamic world, shows intellectual and sexual marginalization of women in this novel. Fouada is not been exploited by religious ideology, like many other female protagonists in her other fictional and non-fictional works. Here, the female protagonist, who is educated and financially independent, is fighting against secular factors that are waged to take control over psychological beings, rather than emotional and spiritual women. Unlike Firdous, she is neither poor uneducated woman nor does she hate man who uses Islamic principles to take control of the lives of woman. She is standing against the men of resources and ideas. She does not hate man; on the contrary, she tries to mimic their gender ideologies. This novel echoes Beauvoir's famous statement (De Beauvoir, 2014): "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," to state that femininity is fashioned by cultural and societal sways rather than biology.

**Tanzeela Tariq:** Problem Identification and Theoretical Framework

**Iqra Tariq:** Methodology and Data Analysis

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