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Mobilities, Spaces, and Agency in Nawal El Saadawi's Woman at Point Zero: A Critical Reading with Reference to Feminist Geography

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Abstract

The mobilities turn in the humanities and social sciences that began during the 1990s is not yet considered integral to discussions of gender studies. Though it has been adopted as a critical lens to read literary narratives in the past decade, the approach remains infrequently used. This article attempts to critically read a quintessential feminist literary narrative of the Arab world with the help of Mobility Studies and Feminist Geography.

Keywords *- Motility, Gendered Space, Agency, Sexual Violence, Mobility Justice*

Introduction

First published in Arabic in 1977, Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* remains a powerful portrayal of women's lives and roles in 20th-century Egypt and resonates with most women all over the world. This novel is based on the real life of a woman named Firdaus who was executed

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many years before the publication of the novel and who was interviewed by Saadawi before her execution in Qanatir prison. Framed as a fictional life narrative of that woman, the novel explores restrictions on women's agency and physical movement in a (patriarchal) society and culture staunchly set against both. The novel has been at the heart of postcolonial as well as subaltern and feminist critical inquiry since its publication. This article intends to broaden that inquiry by discussing this text through the lens of Mobility Studies and Feminist Geography.

Mobility vs Motility

Mobility has been instrumental to evolution, and even survival of living organisms all over the world. It plays a central role in human socio-economic development. While mobility is a given facet of existence for human beings, its historical, social, and cultural aspects in recorded history and discourse need constant consideration, especially when we come to gendered mobility. It is in this context that it is necessary for us to evoke the difference between the more well-known concept of mobility, and its related but lesser referenced notion called motility. Kaufmann et al. describe it as "the capacity of entities…to be mobile in social and geographic space, or as the way in which entities access and appropriate the capacity for socio-spatial mobility according to their circumstances" (750). Thus, while mobility entails actual physical movement, motility means to have the power and ability to move socially and spatially, and it is the latter that has been starkly unavailable to women.

Mobility is often a prerequisite for wider possibilities and opportunities, which often becomes a moot point for women whose mobilities rarely constitute what Kaufmann et al. call "capital" (754). Rather, women's mobilities are mostly tied to marital migrations, spiritual-religious mobilities, and often to survival.This distinction is particularly useful when examining several major characters, especially the female protagonist in *Woman at Point Zero* to foreground how a lack of agency in

their mobilities, or rather the absence of motility plays out as both the cause and effect of the patriarchal society they live in.

Feminist Geography and Spatial Negotiation by Women

In the introduction to *Feminism and Geography*, Gillian Rose notes how the academic discipline of geography itself remained masculinist in nature till at least the latter decades of the 20th century. Women's experiences of spaces were rarely studied as the discipline conventionally focused on spaces lived in, explored, and experienced by men like industries, playgrounds, and urban planning. With most geographical concepts built around men's experiences and since most geographers themselves were men, a radical critique of the discipline itself was given a push by the liberal and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, leading to the development of Feminist Geography with women's issues and experiences at its core. Discussing women's negotiation of everyday spaces in the second chapter of the same text, Rose mentions how "the mundane world of routine is the realm of women's social life in masculinist society" (22).

Beyond the division of the public and the domestic space, how the quotidian unfolds for women exposes the severe power imbalance and spatial hierarchy imposed in a patriarchal society whereby women are allowed to exist, remain, and move as and when that is beneficial to such a society and its cultural discourse. This manifests in a jarring way in Saadawi's work under discussion.

Agency and Women

Perhaps a simple and brief way to establish the importance and distinction between agency and capacity is through an analogy: during the Holocaust in Nazi-occupied Germany and many of the European countries, the wealthy Jews did have financial resources and necessary knowledge to escape their predicament and yet most were unable to do so due to their lack

of agency. Similarly, a handful of colonisers were able to establish hegemony over the Indian subcontinent and its millions of people because the latter lacked agency even if there was a strength in numbers. The understanding of 'agency' predates the terminology itself: whereas it is Aristotle's 'practical wisdom' or Kant's espousal of autonomy for moral agency, it is a fundamental human condition. Afterall, agency is the ability of an individual to think and act independently to shape their life and experiences.

It is evident that motility and agency are interrelated and enable and reinforce one another; the lack of either, or both restricts women's negotiation with spaces including the spaces and places they (get to) navigate in their everyday lives.The following section assesses Saadawi's work *Woman at Point Zero* through the concepts briefly outlined above and it examines how mobilities and women's everyday spaces are both a product as well as a construct of the patriarchal society and culture they inhabit.

Reading Mobilities, Spaces, and Agency in *Woman at Point Zero*

As the female protagonist of the novel Firdaus begins relaying her story to the initial narrator, presumably a fictional version of the author Saadawi herself, we see that Firdaus's life is full of mobility. She fetches water, carrying heavy pitchers that leave her neck strained and stiff (El Saadawi 13), she works in the fields, carries loads of manure, kneads dough, cooks (El Saadawi 14-16), all part of a mechanical routine that occupies her days and life. In moments of tranquillity, like after interacting with her uncle who is based in Cairo and is a university student, we find her dazedly wondering if she was "going to spend [her] life sweeping the dung…carrying manure…baking bread" (El Saadawi 17). Her uncle's charming words and the possibilities of city life entice her to live and study there as well, but her uncle quickly explains that El Azhar where he studies is meant for men and there would be no space for her there. However, Firdaus does not feel she has a space in the house she was born in either.

She repeatedly refers to it as "[her] father's house" and not her house or her home. Even the corner of the hut she usually sleeps in is not hers: she sleeps through unbearable heat near the oven during summers, but in winters, her father would send her to sleep on a straw mat in a small cold north-facing room, taking the usually heated spot for himself.

An orphaned Firdaus eventually does find herself in the city space of Cairo after her uncle assumes her guardianship and takes her away with him. She is awestruck with the modern amenities in her uncle's house, even a mirror nailed to the wall mesmerises her making her feel as if she were "looking out through [her eyes] for the first time, as though [she] had just come into the world" (El Saadawi 22).

In her village, she tries to play and hang out with other children while working in the fields, while being on alert, careful not to be discovered. It is in Cairo that we see her exercising her agency for the first time when she finds herself in a co-ed elementary school, and later in a secondary school. She enjoys learning, and playing with her classmates, and indulges in sweets and snacks. All the while, she routinely takes care of her uncle, cooks, cleans, and anything else that may be necessary around the house even after her uncle marries and moves to a new house. The boarding school she eventually finds herself in is likely the first and only instance of a place where she fits in and dares to dream of and plan for the future.

> There were new books, and new subjects, and girls of my age… We talked to one another about our lives, exchanged secrets, and revealed our depths to one another. There was nobody to upset things for us… (El Saadawi 27)

Her discovery of the school library expands her knowledge and ideas; she discovers how all the rulers in history are men and how they all have an avaricious personality in common. Initially in the narrative, we see her observing and stating the patriarchal nature of the world around her as

a matter of fact. Even her sexual abuse at the hands of Mohammadin and her uncle is something she states as something that just happens and is expected. But at this juncture, we find her applying critical thinking skills aided by her access to reading and education. She infers and concludes how and why "history tend[s] to repeat itself with a foolish obstinacy" (El Saadawi 30).

Ironically, her possibilities increase, and she begins to believe that "the future is still [hers] to decide freely" not when she is exposed to the urban space of Cairo, nor through any other mobilities she experiences later in the novel. It is within the confines of her boarding school, whose walls she describes as being as high as prison walls, that she is relieved from her routine of tending to chores and a mechanical life with little scope to sit and reflect. She flourishes as soon as the quotidian restrictions are lifted, and this particular period of her life remains a safe memory in her mind. Later, she reminisces about it and draws strength from it during all the difficult periods of her life: when she is locked up and raped by Bayoumi regularly, while she is trapped in prostitution, and eventually while she is imprisoned until her execution. Her education and her certificate remain her pride; she carries it as a symbol of her merit and possibilities she might have been able to explore.

As Glaveanu states, "more mobility doesn't automatically lead to more imaginative exploration. But every form of imaginary exploration depends on enough mobility to allow the person to acquire various experiences, including diverse social relations and cultural resources" (Glaveanu 68). And at this point in *Woman at Point Zero*, the notion of motility becomes stronger than mobility once again. Firdaus continues to move from boarding school to her uncle's house and then to her husband's house after a forced marriage. When she finally leaves her husband's, she finds herself rescued by and later living with a coffee-shop owner named Bayoumi. Her later mobilities lead her to Sharifa and her brothel, a comfortable house with amenities, and even to a shack while working a

menial job at a government office. However, all her mobilities are tied to survival. It is either a forceful dislocation, like when she is orphaned, or a means of escape, like when she runs away from her uncle's house, and consecutively from her husband's house, Bayoumi's house, Sharifa's brothel, and so on. Even when she does gain some extent of financial independence as a prostitute, she lacks motility and power and realises how fickle her newfound sense of agency is. Movement for Firdaus is not freedom, it is survival.

An important contradiction to note here is that each of these places that the protagonist navigates through in her bid to survive and escape lets her exist in some way as long as her lack of agency is not called into question. Her early acceptance of sexual violence as something she has to live with as part of her existence renders her a kind of non-being: she repeatedly calls herself "a pebble someone had tossed into water," "a piece of wood," "old neglected furniture," "a pair of shoes," etc. She yields and surrenders, and her moments of questioning of the status quo immediately lead to even more brutal physical and sexual violence. Unable to bear his physical abuse, she runs away from her husband's only to be sent back by her uncle's family, following which the abuse increases manifold. She accepts her sexual arrangement with Bayoumi and dutifully lives with him taken in by his gentle facade. Perhaps feeling safe enough to state her wish, she tells him she wants to work and that she has a secondary school certificate. This brief display of agency breaks Bayoumi's shell: Firdaus is locked up for her audacity, and from that point onward, Bayoumi and his friends repeatedly rape her.

Many feminist geographers including Doreen Massey draw attention to the gendered construction inherent in spaces and places that are often perceived as neutral. In chapter 8 of Space, Place and Gender, Massey notes how an apparently neutral space of an art gallery is replete with gendered undertones causing men and women to feel differently positioned (185-186). In *Woman at Point Zero*, the female characters, particularly

Firdaus owe their struggles and sufferings to the gendered nature of spaces and places in the patriarchal world: a world made by men, for men, and of men. Earlier in the article, we noted how Firdaus was unable to recognise her father's house as her own as she did not actually have a place in it. Even the corner she slept in was subjective to her father's whims and convenience. Her subsequent lodging in her uncle's house while amazing her with its concrete structure and modern amenities was not somewhere she could live either; her existence in that space depended in part on her sexual submission to her uncle. The places she attempts to find some root in allow her to do so only at a cost: Firdaus for almost the entire length of the narrative is destitute and without any capital, her body being the only commodity she can trade. And that is a major reason why joining Sharifa's brothel later feels empowering to her because the sexual abuse was at least no longer covert and even brought her some agency in the form of financial capital. Her sense of agency is shattered when she realises how the pimp Fawzy holds sway over the prosperous Sharifa anyway. Being able to earn money means little without agency and while patriarchy still remains in force.

Even Firdaus acquiesces to the notion of shame associated with prostitution and begins working in the supposedly respectable profession of an office worker, she finds that the job offers neither freedom nor agency and leaves her vulnerable to sexual violence just as before. She realises that the problem never lay with the profession in the first place but with her resistance to sexual violence which came across as a challenge to the power hierarchies and patriarchal status quo. A culmination of her resistance comes through in her murder of the pimp Marzouk. And yet her agency shines through in her admission to the murder in front of the prince who informs the police. Her final act of agency comes from refusing to ask for mercy for herself. She does not appeal to the President for leniency and awaits her execution. She tells the initial narrator of the story that "this journey to a place unknown to everybody on this earth fills [her] with pride"

(El Saadawi 11). Everyone is shown puzzled by her choice to not save her life. As we meet her at the outset of the novel, she is a gentle but proud murderer which the initial narrator feels is a paradox wondering how a woman could ever kill a man, especially a gentle one like Firdaus. Yet Firdaus shows no inclination to deny her crimes or attempt to save her life, only agreeing to share her story with the initial narrator as part of a research case study. It is only by choosing to not live in a world perpetually demanding of her submission and suffering that Firdaus can exercise her agency. Denied motility throughout her life, Firdaus ultimately looks towards death as a transcendental journey to another place "unknown to everybody on this earth."

A closer reading of how Firdaus experiences the streets of Cairo on different occasions can shed more light on the gendered nature of a geographical entity (roads, streets) conventionally associated with freedom and opportunities. The first time she traverses the urban streets of her own accord is also the first time she attempts to exercise her agency by running away from her uncle's house. Fresh out of secondary school, she refuses to marry the middle-aged man she was scheduled to marry and leaves for the streets of Cairo which appear to her as "a new world…which…had not existed [for her] before." Even if it had existed, she had never seen it. She is captivated by the hordes of people moving through the streets and feels she also could be one of them. And yet the terror of sexual violence obliterates her plans soon after. She intends to brave the predatory gazes of men as night falls. She says, "...after all, I was not confronted with a hand holding a knife or a razor, but only two eyes…" (El Saadawi 49). However, the terror intensifies as she notices someone particularly "sinister" and returns to her uncle's house. The second time she runs into the streets of Cairo is also in a bid to survive after an episode of brutal physical violence by her husband. The urban streets hold no awe for her anymore. She says, "the street was just an endless expanse stretched out before my eyes like a sea. I was a pebble thrown into it…" (El Saadawi 53). And yet the liminal

space of the streets is where she seeks refuge once again when she manages to escape from Bayoumi's sexual slavery and captivity. The places that constitute her world are so violent and brutal to her that even with the dangers they offer, she feels the streets are the only safe place into which she could "escape with her whole being" (El Saadawi 60). The insidious violence of her daily life desensitises her to her predicament as she notes while running to the streets after escaping from Sharifa's brothel, "Nothing in the streets was capable of scaring me any longer…" (El Saadawi 73). After many more years of sufferings and sexual abuse later, she feels capable of "enjoying the peace of the night" because "everything which can hurt her she has already undergone" (El Saadawi 104-105).

The final time we witness her walking into the streets is after she has stabbed and killed the pimp threatening to violate her all over again. She wonders why she had never stabbed a man before as she watches fear in the eyes of the dying man. Her act of revenge, into which she tries to pour in all her grievances, leaves her feeling light and free as she walks down the streets along the Nile. She admits to killing him but not to being guilty of a crime.Firdaus lives and meets her death the way she does due to the systemic injustice inherent in the patriarchal society she inhabits, and a large component of that constitutes the gendered nature of the spaces and places women exist in. The lopsided power dynamics of the quotidian makes it impossible for Firdaus and women in general to live as individuals.

Conclusion

A critical reading of *Woman at Point Zero* vis a vis mobility justice and gendered space helps evaluate how patriarchal chokeholds need not necessarily manifest through, although in case of this novel it does, outright refusal of women's rights or autonomy. The same Cairo that enables Firdaus's uncle to get an education, obtain a respectable professional position, and climb social ladder by marrying well, preys on Firdaus until her extreme loss of agency renders her non-human, "a pebble," "a shoe."

Both belong to the same socio-economic circumstances, and yet she cannot dare even look toward the doors her uncle walks through.

In recent times, many opportunities and leeway have opened up for women and yet, in the absence of motility, the power and agency to move socially and spatially, and as long as spaces continue to be inherently reactionary to the presence of women, little can be achieved in terms of meaningful gender justice.

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