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Counter-conduct and Persistence in Selected Works by Egyptian Women Writers

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Abstract

In this paper, Michel Foucault's concept of "counter-conduct" and Judith Butler's concept of "persistence" are deployed, explored, and applied to rethink the relationship between the dominant patriarchal power and women's dissent as represented in the writings of Latifa al-Zayyat (1923-1996), Nawal El Sadaawi (1931-2021), and Salwa Bakr (1949). Analyzing al-Zayyat's *The Open Door* [al-Bāb al-maftūḥ], El Sadaawi's short story "The Picture" [al-Sura] and Bakr's "Thirty-one Beautiful Green Trees" [Ihdā wa thālathūn shajarah jamīlah khadrā] in terms of the twofold approach allows in-depth explorations of various strategies of dissent and different modes of counter-conduct and persistence in the selected literary texts. It also allows for rigorous and authentic evaluation of how the female protagonists - Layla, Narjis and Kareema – endeavor to carve out other ways of being that lead to the emergence of their new subjectivities and their gendered identities.

Keywords: Agency, Counter-Conduct, Everyday Acts of Resistance, Persistence, Women's Writing.

Introduction

Coming from a patriarchal culture that magnifies men's roles and marginalizes women's, many Egyptian women writers during the last sixty years have interrogated the governing rationalities across the patriarchal system and identified how these rationalities are contested through various modes of counter-conducts and persistence, which highlight women's agency, empowerment, and resilience. They have redefined women's established ways of being and conceptualized strategies, acts, and practices used by their female protagonists to communicate their alternative discourses on gender roles. In doing so, they have uncovered practices of persistence, defiance, and resistance, and paved the way for new conditions of life for women.

In this paper, the focus is on how three Egyptian women writers have empowered their protagonists to break the chains of patriarchy by using various forms of resistance which allow for new truths/voices/ and struggles to be heard out. Latifa al-Zayyat (1923-1996), Nawal El Sadaawi (1931-2021), and Salwa Bakr (1949) have mobilized the available resources their protagonists have to negotiate and resisted the constraints on their paths. The protagonists portrayed are involved in diverse ways of "everyday" acts of

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resistance which are commonplace and ordinary in nature (Scott 1985, xvi). Although less explicitly confrontational than any armed revolt, Scott argues that "everyday" acts still qualify as resistance. I also argue that beyond overtly critiquing the patriarchal hegemony, contestations of the three protagonists – Layla, Narjis, and Kareema – are identified and analyzed despite the variety in scale and success. In other words, the paper explicitly reflects on the protagonists' variable and contingent "everyday" forms of resistance and different modes and practices of counter-conduct and persistence to gain control over their lives and power to act. To rethink the relationship between the dominant patriarchal power and women's everyday acts of resistance as represented in the writings of al-Zayyat, El Sadaawi, and Bakr, Michel Foucault's concept of counter-conduct and Judith Butler's concept of persistence are deployed, explored, and applied. In the three texts, the protagonists resort to numerous everyday forms of resistance, which are "low-profile techniques" (Scott, xvi) that sometimes go unnoticed by the patriarchal gender system; yet they include shifts in practices which nibble away its unjust ideology and hence destabilize women's status quo. Their acts are not "grand refusals" but "dispersed and shifting points of resistance, or forms of counter-conduct" (Death 2016, 239).

So, analyzing al-Zayyat's *The Open Door* [al-Bāb al-maftūḥ], El Sadaawi's short story "The Picture" [al-Sura] and Bakr's "Thirty-one Beautiful Green Trees" [Ihdā wa thālathūn shajarah jamīlah khadrā] in terms of the twofold approach allows in-depth explorations of the kinds of everyday expressions, discernible strategies of dissent and forms of refusal in the selected literary texts. It also allows for rigorous and authentic evaluation of how Layla, Narjis and Kareema endeavor "to escape direction by others," "define the way … to conduct [themselves]" (Foucault 1978, 259), and carve out other ways of being that lead to the emergence of their new subjectivities and their gendered identities. The three protagonists are not chosen randomly, for, although they are different in age and live in different times, they share a similar dilemma as they struggle against the limited boundaries of repressive and oppressive traditions and social norms which promote male supremacy and strip women of their rights over their lives.

Drawing upon both approaches, this paper contributes significantly to the vast reservoir of knowledge published about Egyptian women writers including al-Zayyat, El Sadaawi, and Bakr. Although there is an extensive body of work written about the Egyptian women's empowerment, resistance, and agency, there is extremely limited discussion of everyday acts of resistance, counter-conduct, and persistence. For example, "The Madness of Non-Conformity: Woman versus society in the fiction of Salwā Bakr" (2006) by Rasheed El-Enany, "Arab Women Writers as Revolutionary Orators and Catalytic Agents of Emancipation" (2014) by Safaa Nasser, and "Resisting Silence in Arab Women's Autobiographies" (2001) by Magda Al-Nowaihi have examined women's non-conformity, voicing, and voicelessness. Roswitha Badry's "Socially Marginalized Women in Selected Narratives of Egyptian Women Writers" (2018) and Hülya Yıldız's "Freedom in Confinement: Women's Prison Narratives and the Politics of Possibility" (2019) have analyzed the relationship between political, national, and feminist struggle for equality between genders. In addition, there are many theses that tackled similar issues like "Breaking the Silence: Nationalism and Feminism in Contemporary Egyptian Women's Writing" (2010)

by Chia-Ling She, and "Power of Women - Solidarity - Unveiling of the Mind: The Life and Work of Nawal El Saadawi" by Lauren Spath (An Honors Thesis) (2005). They have defied the misrepresentation of Egyptian women as uniformly passive or docile but they have not explored the protagonists' persistence or counter-conducts.

There is, however, one publication titled "Practices of Counter-Conduct as a Mode of Resistance in Middle East Women's Life Writings" (2018) by Asl Moussa Pourya that explores the practices of counter-conduct in three contemporary memoirs by Jean P. Sasson, Zainab Salbi, and Manal al-Sharif. Asl's article neither touches upon Butler's concept of persistence nor how Egyptian women resist despite the precariousness of their situations. In other words, the contribution of my paper lies in the fact that it fills this gap by exploring how the three protagonists, through persistent acts of resistance and of conducting themselves, exercise agency, make choices, and shape their lives.

In what follows, I will first elaborate on Foucault's concept of "counter-conduct" and Butler's "persistence" and highlight the way the terms will be used in the analysis of the three selected literary texts. Then I will review how al-Zayyat, El Saadawi, and Bakr have contested the stereotyping of women as passive, powerless victims of male power by portraying their protagonists' various modes and practices of counter-conduct and persistence. In the last section, I will analyze how the three protagonists have utilized alternative conceptions of everyday resistance to persist and survive.

1. Counter-conduct and Persistence

Foucault's theories of power and counter-conduct as a mode of resistance have profound impact on the feminist politics and feminine resistance to power in general and on Butler's theorization of power and subjectivation in particular. I would like to address these aspects of Foucault's analysis of power that Butler invokes in her call for women's persistence, which she has defined as a "force, figure, and concept" that is "bound up with endurance, survival, defiance, willfulness, resistance, and flourishing, but also with dead ends, social death, and extinction" (2021 MLA Call for Participation).

Foucault understands power as "the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization" (1990, 92). Power as he perceives it is everywhere, local, and unstable. Power relationships too exist everywhere, and flow bottom up and not top down, in a capillary way. In addition, power is not separable from resistance to power as both are part of the same dynamic. As he elucidates, "there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent" (1990, 95-96).

According to Foucault, in any power relations there are two major elements that are indispensable: the first is "the other" which he defines as "the one over whom power is exercised" and the second is the "field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions" that may open up for "the other" (1990, 220). This means that those who are governed have a formative relationship with those who exercise power. So, power is not repressive as it passes through the hands of the dominant and the dominated, and the victimizer and the victim. Foucault's power paradigm has proved to be helpful to feminists as it shows

the diverse sources of women's subordination as well as women's engagement in resistance in their everyday lives.

In addition, Foucault regards power as a form of conduct (1978, 259) which he defines as,

> the activity of conducting (conduire), of conduction (la conduction) …, but it is equally the way in which one conducts oneself (se conduit), lets oneself be conducted (se laisse conduire), is conducted (est conduit), and finally, in which one behaves (se comporter) as an effect of a form of conduct (une conduite) as the action of conducting or of conduction (conduction). (Foucault 1978, 258)

From the outset, conduct includes the way in which one conducts oneself and the way in which one is conducted by others. In other words, conducts are inextricably bound up with counter-conducts and are constituted by and constitutive of each other. In the series of lectures titled *Security, Territory, Population delivered at the Collège de France in 1977-1978*, Foucault defines counter-conduct as the struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others (1978, 268). He stresses that the immanence of counter-conduct goes beyond the mere negative or reactive phenomenon of disobedience (1978, 259). Counter-conduct does not mean utter rejection of the processes of governmentality; rather it refers to forms of resistance that are characterized by the need to be conducted differently, to have a different type of conduction, and to create a space for each individual to conduct oneself. Counter-conduct emphasizes "the will not to be governed thusly, like that, by these people, at this price" (Foucault 2007, 72). Counter-conduct thus can be viewed as a positive form which utilizes the same means of governing to create a different form of conduct; that is to say "wanting to be conducted differently, by other leaders (conducteurs) …, towards other objectives and forms of salvation, and through other procedures and methods" (Foucault 1978, 259).

In Foucault's vast oeuvre, various modes of counter-conduct can be identified. In his discussion of forms of resistance to the Christian Church and the religious relations between pastoral conduct and pastoral counter-conduct in the Middle Ages, Foucault highlights the following counter-conduct modes: "asceticism, communities, mysticism, return to the text, [and] eschatological beliefs" (1978, 282). In addition, Foucault adds *Parrēsia* or Truth-telling. All these counter-conduct modes aim to "redistribute, reverse, nullify, and partially or totally discredit … power in the systems of salvation, obedience, and truth" (1978, 271). This means that there are multiple systems of hierarchy whether implicit or intentional within which women can be simultaneously powerful and powerless. So, the silenced and marginalized women's rigorous attempts to work on the self and on power can initiate change and help them forge a path toward the future.

In Butler's fruitful engagement with Foucault's concepts, she uses Foucault's analysis of power to explore how gender is articulated through performativity. She views gender as a construct through repetitive performance of words, acts, and gestures, which "requires a performance that is repeated." As she adds, "this repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established" (Butler 1999, 178). This means that gender identity is not something fixed or inherent, but an act which grows out of, reinforces, and is reinforced by societal norms. In this way,

gender is destabilized, new possibilities for agency are opened up, and the opposition to power becomes possible. As Wijitbusaba Marome explains, opportunities for resistance increase as individuals are allowed to locate strategies of subversive repetition and to affirm the local possibilities of intervention within the repetition of constituting identity practices (2005, 122).

Butler also regards power as a productive force that permeates all social relations. In line with Foucault, she believes that every form of power has its "productive effect" (2004, 41). Butler has conceived norms as mechanisms of power that govern the cultural intelligibility and recognizability of different kinds of subjects, lives, practices, and actions. In this sense, Butler contends that women cannot persist without such norms; in other words, women's persistence relies "on the possibility that they will be able to negotiate within them, derive their agency from the field of their operation" (2004, 32). In addition, Butler argues that "to persist in one's own being is only possible on the condition that we are engaged in receiving and offering recognition" (2004, 31). According to her, recognition can be received and offered by engaging with the norms of recognition, and "if there are no norms of recognition by which we are recognizable, then it is not possible to persist in one's own being, and we are not possible beings; we have been foreclosed from possibility (2004, 31). Hence, subjection to such norms of recognition is indispensable to women's persistence as human beings.

To conclude this part, both Foucault and Butler have unfolded possibilities for action and for resistance through the negotiation of the power that underlies everyday encounters and ordinary acts. Women like many powerless and vulnerable groups rarely have the resources or opportunities to have outright confrontations with the patriarchal authorities or resist openly or overtly against them; yet they use indirect and subtle strategies that are intended to expose and weaken the social norms and cultural beliefs that serve to contain women.

2. Acts of Resistance in al-Zayyat, el Saadawi, and Bakr

Egyptian women writers like Latifa al-Zayyat, Alifa Rifaat (1930-1996), Radwa Ashour (1946-2014), Nawal El Sadaawi, Salwa Bakr, May Telmissany (1965), Miral al-Tahawy (1970), and many others have played a great role in contesting dominant gender norms and exposing the exploitation and oppression of women. They have not only diagnosed social ills that lead to women's oppression, but they have also acted as agents of social change through their critique of the patriarchy.

Al-Zayyat, El Sadaawi, and Bakr have employed a wide range of everyday resistance methods situated in their protagonist's' acts of negotiation, agreements and disagreements, even in their silence. Latifa al-Zayyat – a distinguished Egyptian activist, novelist, critic and academic – has positioned herself in conscious alignment with resisting social forces and has interweaved in her literary and critical works examples of counter-conduct, persistence, resistance, and flourishing. *The Open Door* unfolds in the period between 1946 and 1956, and chronicles the parallel struggle of the middle-class girl, Layla, and of Egypt, as both of them attempt to free themselves from gender restrictions and imperial control. Hoda Elsada has noticed that "there is a direct link between the public and the private: Layla's journey toward freedom parallels the nation's journey toward independence: her private struggle with her family, with

tradition, with stereotypical roles imposed on women, corresponds to the national struggle against colonialism and exploitation" (2012, 102).

Like al-Zayyat who has concerned herself with her protagonists' personal freedom, El Sadaawi too is well-known for her ferocious defense of women's rights. El Sadaawi started out her career as a medical doctor in rural areas, which allowed her to become conscious of women's abuse and male corruption. This awareness induced her to become politically and socially active. In her critical and creative writings, she has articulated strategies of persistence and resistance against gender inequalities, oppression and injustice inflicted upon women.

Salwa Bakr is also well-known for her political activism which exposes the plight of women in the unjust social order in which they live. In her works, women are doubly victimized by the patriarchal system and by the authoritarian system which oppress both men and women. Bakr's writings emphasize "the status of women's rights as human rights within a collective political struggle" (Johnson-Davis and Harlow 1993, xiii).

In spite of coming from different social, political, and economic backgrounds, one of the striking similarities among these writers is how they agree with Butler's statement that "persistence in a condition of vulnerability proves to be its own kind of strength" (2020, 137). Letting their protagonists be conducted differently undermines the patriarchal discourse of power. They resist the dominant social, political, religious, and cultural discourses and structures and choose for their protagonists diverse passive, active, or subversive ways to cope with lives (Badry 2018, 257-258). In addition, they disrupt the concept of authority on all levels starting from the authority of the father, the husband, the family in general and ending with local government.

In addition, Al-Zayyat, El Sadaawi, and Bakr have interrogated the governing systems that disenfranchise and marginalize women; and in so doing, they highlight how these systems are contested through the protagonists' everyday acts of resistance. They have turned the margin to a new center of their own subjectivity; thus, they have decentralized power relations and redefined the relationship between men and women. In their writings, they have provided outlets for protest, played Foucault's "*Parrēsia*," broken the silence to tell the truth, and given voice to multiple truths. In this way, they have allowed their protagonists to persist, survive and flourish.

Furthermore, the three writers have portrayed how their protagonists attempt to assert a place for themselves despite the climate of fear created by the male dominated society. Each protagonist fights her own battle, reshapes and creates herself anew. Layla in *The Open Door* is exposed to a series of violent confrontations with her society's hegemonic ideologies. At first, she succumbs to them; and consequently becomes a prisoner at her own home. As she proclaims, "to reach womanhood was to enter a prison where the confines of one's life were clearly and decisively fixed. At its door stood her father, her brother, and her mother" (al-Zayyat 2002, 24). This makes her see herself as "a slave, nothing but a jariya! A jariya in the slave market!" (41). When she disobeyed the rigid rules and joined the students' demonstrations against the British occupation, her father "yanked off Layla's shoes and against her feet sounded the slap of the hard slipper." As the slipper "hit against her legs and then her back" (51), the only

words she could hear were "shut up!" Literally speaking, she remains "silent" for so many years until she finally manages to break the silence, reclaim her independence, and open the door to new possibilities.

Narjis leads a similar nightmarish life under the protection of her father. His mere sight fills her heart with terror. It is worth noting that there are no signs of physical abuse inflicted upon the young protagonist, but the psychological shackles that her father has imposed on her are much worse. Like Layla, she is imprisoned at her home, with no mother, friends, or companions, except for a maid. She is also stripped of her rights as a human being: no education, no social life, not even looking from the windows. Her father is portrayed as a god-like figure, "vested with supreme authority" (EL Sadaawi 2005, 62). One day, when "her gaze met that of her father, … she shuddered" although she knows that "they were not his real eyes, only his picture hanging on the wall, but her little body continued to tremble" (61). Despite the difficulty of her situation, she also manages to crack the cocoon around her and open the door for opportunities for growth.

Kareema's life too is unrecognizable within the dominant patriarchal script of living and being. When attempting to free herself from the confines of the rigidity of ideas and values, and to develop an independent identity, she is rebuked harshly. Her outspoken nature clashes with the norms of the patriarchal society that expects women to be passive and silent. Yet like Layla and Narjis, Kareema continues in her subversive actions to disrupt the patriarchal dominant structures via more covert forms of resistance.

These examples of violence not only constitute a site for Layla, Narjis, and Kareema's oppression but most importantly they embody modes of their everyday acts of resistance. It is undeniable that the three protagonists are subject to the domination and subjugation of the patriarchal gaze, but they challenge the patriarchal ideologies through various strategies of resistance that are fluid and complex, mobile, and polyvalent. They take multiple forms to correspond to the multiple forms of power that conduct them. Sometimes the counter-conduct is mundane and trivial as in the case of Narjis; sometimes it is full of willfulness and flourishing as in the case of Layla; and other times, it is full of defiance and resistance, but also with a dead end as in the case of Kareema. However, it is this continuity in the persistence and resistance to gendered oppression that allows the three protagonists to stand up to patriarchal hegemony.

3. Flourishing through "Communities" in *the open door*

In *The Open Door*, Layla's acts of resistance and rebellion against power figures that hamper her development and Egypt's independence are analyzed. Her persistence and flourishing are promoted when she refashions her relationship to herself and to the others around her. Joining "communities" in various stages of her life helps her negate the prescribed roles of subjectivity that patriarchal ideology imposes on women.

Butler believes that flourishing must include some "provisions" and "principles" that organize the social and civic life (2020, 48). As the daughter of a conservative middle-class family, many of these "provisions" and "principles" that qualify flourishing are blocked. Layla lives under the traditional

patriarchal authority characterized by rigid familial and social limitations and hinderances that subjugate and victimize women. She is oppressed by her father who has imposed certain confines on her, stating, “Layla, you must realize that you have grown up. From now on you are absolutely not to go out by yourself. No visits. Straight from home to school" (24). The father issues orders without giving any space for Layla to express herself. She also feels very confused as it becomes difficult for her to distinguish between what is proper and improper “as a sudden laugh, straight from the heart can be considered ‘improper’” (25), and any frank comment can be interpreted as "out of bounds" (25) – the bounds of the proper conduct, instructed by her mother who tries to increase Layla’s value in the marriage market.

Layla is similarly oppressed by her headmistress, a conformist like Layla’s mother, with very clear lines of demarcation for gender roles, as she asserts, “women’s job was motherhood …. Woman’s place was in the home. … Weapons and fighting were for men” (48). Under the patriarchal gaze, Layla has seen herself as a mere object, with no power to direct her life. As she sorrowfully admits, “Wrong. Yes, indeed, I was wrong. I showed what I felt as if I were a real human being. I forgot. I forgot that I’m not a person, I’m only a girl. A woman. Yes, I forgot” (56).

Layla is divided between surrender to mundane preaching of her father, mother, and headmistress and her rebellious nature nurtured by the social reality of the national struggle. “News about demonstrations sweeping Cairo’s streets awakens her”. When she joins the students’ demonstrations, she feels liberated as doors for the production of a new subjectivity has been opened for her to become a subject and not an object. In this context, the demonstrations can be regarded as Foucault’s “communities” which include “a counter-society aspect” that “overturn[s] social relations and hierarchy” (1978, 279).

Once among the protestors and demonstrators, Layla felt not only “alive … strong and weightless, as if she were one of those birds circling above” (50), but also “melting into the whole” as “everything around her was propelling her forward, everything, everyone, surrounding her, embracing her, [and] protecting her” (51). In the crowd, among the demonstrators, Layla also feels protected and safe. Joining forces with the people in this “community” helps her acquire a new voice. “She began all of a sudden to shout again, in that voice that belonged to someone else, a voice that joined her whole self to them all” (51). She could hear herself “calling out with a voice that “seemed not her own,” it is a voice that “united the old Layla with her future self and with the collective being of these thousands of people - faces, faces as far as she could see” (50-51).

Voice can be regarded as a synonym for presence, and immediate self-expression. Voice here refers to Layla’s new subjectivity, intentionality of a newly-discovered speaking subject. As the third person narrator highlights, “[b]ehind her the crowd pushed forward …, pushing her further from her father, his face very dark indeed, and away from the image of her mother, her lips even paler now. Her father vanished from sight and she saw only the crowds of thousands, and herself melting into the whole” (51). This feeling of being alive becomes a transformative experience for her, as she clarifies, “it seemed as though an intense, concentrated beam of light had pierced her body to settle inside” (60). Yet, it is worth noting that *The Open Door* is not a bildungsroman – a coming-of-age story. We have seen Layla

metamorphose in front of us and become a strong character. Unfortunately, she relapses again into a state of silence, passivity and social death after her father brutally beats her. Deprived of her subjectivity and agency, Layla sees herself "just a mat. A doormat for shoes" (55).

Later, when she joined the university, the rhetoric about women's roles had already changed. In one the National Guard lectures, an officer talked about "the value of women" and the "true equality being given to them" since they were granted "the right to defend the nation." So, finally, "the door" is opened "for female students who might want to volunteer for the National Guard" (246, 247). As a member in the National Guard, "[t]he feelings that had abandoned her flooded back" and she sees herself "capable and strong after all" (249). Being "national" brings with it the sense of mutual acceptance and shared responsibility. It is the bombing of Port Said in which she stays for work reasons that triggers drastic change inside her as the narrator states, "something vast springing from deep within, something new and powerful that would not leave her be, something stronger than the fire that burned in her chest, than the iciness that shuddered in her limbs, stronger than the overwhelming desire to let go, than the dirt, than death" (339). Her participation in the popular resistance in Port Said awakens an inner strength that empowers Layla and consequently a new self is born. In the end of the novel, we see Layla "stretch[ing] her hands around her shoulders, hugging herself, quieting the surge of love and pride and confidence that swept over her body" (352).

Like all "communities," the popular resistance movement possesses "a considerable capacity both to appear as a different society, a different form of conduct, and to channel revolts of conduct, take them over, and control them" (Foucault 1978, 266-67). In this "community," the primacy of "being conducted otherwise" gains political force and Layla acquires an active understanding of the process of her positioning in the patriarchal society. Playing active roles in the Resistance propels a shift in the tactics she uses to modify her relationship with the world. When she finally reaches "the realization that she had worked her will, and that she could always do it again" (249), she informs her brother, "I'm not leaving." Her voice again seemed "strange" and "the tone seemed different, too; where was the strain of conciliation, or even of threat or anger or refusal? This tone of absolute decision" (342-43).

Layla becomes an equal partner in the battle as the omniscient narrator comments, "she left the circle of the family, the sphere of the self, for the orbit of all, and no one could keep her back" (343). So, the "communities" allow Layla to negotiate her vulnerable conditions, free herself from the paternalistic power, open the door to endless opportunities, and finally unleash her potential as a full-fledged human being. From Butler's point of view, Layla has toiled to persist in her own being and she furthered the cause of her own self-preservation and self-enhancement. Finally, she has access to the means of persistence and flourishing.

"Asceticism" as a Means of Endurance in "the Picture"

If joining "communities" has enabled Layla to subvert all forms of authority, survive and flourish, EL Sadaawi has articulated another form of counter-conduct for her young protagonist, Narjis, which is asceticism. As clarified earlier, subjection to social norms of recognition locates us "outside of

ourselves," in a "broader sociality" and "this dependency is the basis of our endurance and survivability" (Butler 2004, 32, 33). In the light of this, Narjis's fundamental need to be recognized and accepted by her father causes her to subject herself to norms that "injure[s]" her because "they constitute [her] socially" (1997, 104). However, through asceticism, which is "a form of internal challenge … to the other" a sort of "reversed obedience" (Foucault 1978, 273, 275), Narjis learns to comply with her father's orders and values. She remains subservient and inactive in the face of her father's dominance till she succeeds in slightly carving out a new place for herself. It is worth mentioning that "compliance and resistance should … not be seen as 'either–or responses' or as absolute categories" as they may "coexist" (Ybema and Horvers 1237). This "coexistence" goes in line with Butler's proclamation that being vulnerable does not mean being passive as "vulnerability is neither fully passive nor fully active" (2020, 131, 132). So, vulnerability and practices of resistance go hand in hand.

As a mode of counter-conduct, asceticism is not vocal or self-proclaimed, and it does not take a definitive oppositional stance. It is a subtle form of dissent, a "micro-act of resistance" that "contain[s] elements of acceptance and compliance" (qtd. in Ybema and Horvers 1236). If in "communities" and "counter-societies" the person leans on other members for support, asceticism is an individualized counter-conduct strategy, which allows the person to resist through "self-government" as it concerns the self's relation to the self.

The mode of counter-conduct adopted in this short story responds to the form of power embedded in Narjis's relationship to the patriarchy represented by her father. Asceticism gradually strengthens her will because of the progression according to a scale of increasing difficulty. Narjis, the 13-year-old protagonist, has empowered herself through "the exercise of the self on the self" (Foucault 1978, 275). Since the day she was born, she has willfully imposed practices on herself to avoid her father's wrath and to create for herself "a state of tranquility, of appeasement" (Foucault 1978, 273). For instance, she has trained herself to look at him only from the back. As the third person narrator comments,

> for thirteen years, since the day she was born, she had seen him only from the back. When he had his back to her, she could raise her eyes and contemplate his tall, broad frame. She never looked him in the eye, and never exchanged a glance or a word with him. When he looked at her, she bowed her head; and when he spoke to her, it was not words he uttered, but instructions and orders, to which she responded with "Okay" or "Yes" mechanically, in blind obedience. (El Sadaawi 2005, 61)

Narjis in her day-to-day interactions with her father "performs compliance perfectly" (Butler 2020, 134). She maneuvers strategically and behaves "respectfully" in a very similar fashion to an experience the writer had as a child, which is narrated in *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1977). The writer states, "I was not supposed to look into people's eyes directly but meant to drop my glance whenever I was confronted with someone. If I laughed, I was expected to keep my voice low …. When I played, my legs were not supposed to move freely, but to be kept politely together" (1980, 10). So, Narjis uses this survival skill of predicting her father's actions to avoid his rejection and abuse.

The third person narrator gives us examples of her compliance with her father's unjustified orders: "When he told her to leave school and stay at home, she left school and stayed at home. When he told her not to open the windows, she didn't open the windows. When he told her not to look out from behind the shutters, she didn't look out from behind the shutters" (2005, 61). In addition, whenever she passes before his picture hung on the wall, she finds herself "kneeling in front of it as though in prayer" (62). She endures the difficulty and the hostility of her circumstances without complaining. Narjis is different from Layla in not overtly exhibiting signs of courage or defiance. However, remaining "defiantly silent" can be described as a form of resistance to her father's authority (Hollander and Einwohner 536). It is a form of "subtle" resistance which has "effects on day-to-day … processes" (Ybema and Horvers 1236). Despite her fear, she has the burning desire to "look at him without bowing her head, to fix her eyes on his eyes and see them, know them, get acquainted with them" (61-62) which she manages to achieve at the end of the story.

The shattering of this world comes one day when she went to the kitchen at night and "her gaze settled on a naked two-headed heap of flesh rolling about on the floor" (64). It was her father with the maid. In this moment of sudden realization, the male hypocrisy and practice of double standards of morality are exposed. She has lived surrounded by taboos and prohibitions, while her father indulges himself in affairs. It is this hypocrisy that she has witnessed and experienced that has driven her to change.

After this eye-opener experience, the way she looks to her father is no longer the same. As the narrator comments, "she kept staring at her father's face without bowing her head. His wide eyes were bulging, and his sharp, crooked nose sliced his face in two. A long spider's web clung to the high and pointed tip of the nose, moving to and fro in the night breeze that was rushing in through the shutters" (64). When she goes up to the picture and blows on the spider's web to clear it away, "she managed to remove them, but at the same time she destroyed the picture, which had become wet with her spittle, and it fell from between her fingers to the floor in little fragments..." (64). This breaking of her father's picture may not seem like a strong action of resistance, but it is her persistence that shows her inner strength and resilience. As an ascetic, she manages to survive and to keep her dignity intact.

It cannot be denied that Narjis has suffered from subordination, oppression, marginalization, and vulnerability but as Butler has explained, "the situation of those deemed vulnerable" is in fact "a constellation of vulnerability, rage, persistence, and resistance" (2020, 131). Vulnerability should not to be identified with passivity as it only makes sense in light of an embodied set of social relations, including practices of resistance. Narjis gradually overcomes her vulnerability, gains control over herself, and obtains personhood and selfhood. she has opted for asceticism as a mode of counter-conduct to redefine her relationship with her father within the traditional social institution. Her asceticism reinforces the idea that silences do not entail passivity, submissiveness or subservience, but rather it indicates the visibility of new subjectivities and a hidden transcript used by women for survival in a patriarchal society (Cruz 2015, 21 & Teo 2019, 4).

Parrēsia and Survival in "Thirty-one Beautiful Green Trees"

Most of Bakr's novels and stories "focus upon the detail of everyday life as it is experienced by Egyptian women, and they express her discontent with the cultural attitudes, social institutions and economic policies that shape women's lives" (Seymour-Jorn 151). "Thirty-One Beautiful Green Trees" falls under this category as it depicts the everyday details of a discontent Egyptian woman – Kareema – who can be described as a non-conformist. Kareema questions and rebels against the patriarchal hypocritical and rigid rules that try to confine her in the mold of the passive and silent woman. She is humiliated, oppressed, and stigmatized for deviating from the socially accepted behavior and for having the courage to rebel and criticize the systematic oppression of women, which rendered her in the male gaze as lunatic and eccentric.

Like Layla and Narjis, Kareema uses everyday acts of resistance to survive the physical and psychological pain inflicted upon her for her courage to defy the corrupt patriarchal system. Butler contends that to survive means "to be" (1997, 7), and to continue to exist. However, out of the "desire to survive" (Butler 1997, 7) subjects are perpetually willing to submit to their own subordination until they manage to create a new space for themselves. This is exactly what Kareema tried to achieve. Throughout her life, Kareema has spoken the truth to power, and relentlessly resisted all forms of corruption around her. Kareema's counter-conduct mode is different from Layla and Narjis's to correspond to her concerns and problematizations. Kareema is a "parrhesiast" who stands up, speaks, tells the truth to a tyrant, and risks [her] life" (Foucault 2010, 61). Foucault defines *Parrēsia* as "the free courage by which one binds oneself in the act of telling the truth" (2010, 66). Kareema is the person who "stands up to a tyrant and tells him the truth" (Foucault 2010, 50), and challenges regimes of power through her fearless speech. By practicing *Parrēsia*, she challenges and changes the ways in which she interacts with her society, other people, and herself.

The story opens with the first-person narrator telling us her story, "to write it and set it down precisely" as it happened to her. Writing is her last act of resistance so that "maybe one day someone will find the pages … and feel pity for [her]" (12). She wants to share with the readers how she lived before being brought to what is described as "this hellish place" (12). We know later that this "hellish place" is the mental asylum; and the reason for her conviction is her attempt to cut off her tongue. But what has led her to this action? The beginning is her realization that she is different from people around her as she cares about "the thirty-one green-leafed trees adorning the street" (15) which she sees everyday on her way to work. One day, she counts only thirty trees instead of thirty-one. One of the Indian fig trees has been uprooted and "thrown down on the pavement amidst the rubble from the old building they were pulling down" (15). Kareema is shaken by the event; and as she contends,

> From that moment on I began to sense changes taking place inside me: there were slight pains in my insides and I would constantly have frightful headaches. To begin with I didn't give the matter much thought, but things continued like this for days and weeks, and after a while the headache changed into ghastly pains in my head, crazy pains that accompanied every breath I took. (15-16)

In addition to the destruction of trees, several other incidents at her workplace have made her feel worse. One day, she has a clash with her line manager when she forgets to wear her brassiere. When she gets severely scolded by a female colleague on behalf of the manager, Kareema recalls what she did,

> I ran off to Mr. Aziz's room and said to him, trembling with rage …, that I had in fact forgotten to put on a brassiere, …. I also informed him that I had decided from now on to turn up at the Water Company without a brassiere because I had given a lot of thought to brassieres and had found that there was no need for such a piece of clothing, in the same way that there was absolutely no sense to the necktie he was wearing. (19-20)

The practice of *Parrēsia* is a means by which Kareema tries to make actual changes in the ways in which she lives. Telling the truth to power opens up a space of risk for her; as Foucault has clarifie, "it opens up a danger, a peril, in which the speaker's very life will be at stake (2010, 56). As a typical parrhesiast, she is not cowed by the humiliation she has received at her workplace and undertakes to continue telling the truth at any unspecified price, which "may be as high as [her] own death" (Foucault 2010, 56). So, on the day of the general elections in the city, she walks to the elementary school where the election committee is to be found. On her way, she notices a weasel running around the street in full daylight. Kareema's anger and desperation by the ugliness and pollution prompts her to start questioning one of the candidates:

> 'Does your party do anything about planting trees in the city instead of concrete? Has it formed a well-equipped army to deal seriously with the weasels?' … 'It's quite futile what you are all doing, with your bodies as flabby as they are, for a healthy mind is in a healthy body. Apart from which, most of our ministers are ugly and they have such fat necks one doubts their ability to do anything useful.' …'Where are the women? I see no women around me. Why have you not sought out the reasons for the sparrows having fled from our city and why it is full of flies and mosquitoes?' (23)

Angered by her outspokenness, one man snatches her "identity and voting cards" (23), and refuses to give them back, which drives her to "curse" and "hit him". Kareema does not remember what happens next as she has been physically attacked by men around her and carried home. It is here that Kareema's persistence is threatened as her body is undone by others. For Butler the body is central to a person's conceptualization of vulnerability since it is the body that exposes us to the other's gaze, touch, and violence. Not only has Kareema been violated physically but also psychologically by her mother, who curses her saying, "won't you ever stop your silliness and keep silent? By Allah, you deserve to have your tongue cut off" (24). This triggers one of her childhood most traumatic memories when her mother threatened "to cut off [her] tongue" as a punishment for revealing a secret. The same threat makes her question herself whether it would have been better if her mother had cut off her own tongue. She wonders, "what would have happened if my tongue had actually been cut off? Would not all my difficulties have ended there and then? Would I not have kept silent forever? I would have contented

myself with watching what went on around me without expressing my opinion" (25). In this moment of desperation, she decides to cut off her tongue to remain silent. As a result, she is sent to the mental asylum.

Her relapse however does not last long as she resorts to another form of survival which is self-writing. In his essay "Self Writing" in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, Foucault speaks about a form of self-writing called the hupomnemata whose "intent is not to pursue the unspeakable, nor to reveal the hidden, nor to say the unsaid," but on the contrary "to capture the already said … for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self" (1998, 210-11). Hupomnemata allows a life writer to constitute an identity and engage in the care of the self. Kareema's self-writing gives meaning and purpose to her life under the label of insanity. Her endeavors to avoid and defeat such limited and static definition help her produce her self-writing, through which she asserts her right to survive and to establish a livable life against all odds.

In her act of self-writing, she faithfully narrates her struggles of opposition with patriarchy and her survival strategies, which empowers her. She considers self-writing as an opposite to self-annihilation and self-destruction. Kareema's act of self-writing is a therapeutic act and an act of defiance, which signifies mastery over adversaries, care of the self, and shaping of a new self. Like Layla and Narjis, she also endures and persists despite all the conditions that tried to undermine her.

Conclusion

I argued in this paper that Latifa al-Zayyat, Nawal El Sawaadi, and Salwa Bakr have appropriated, transformed, and negotiated power relations and have recognized contestations of power in their protagonists' lives. I also argued that the persistence of the various manifestations of everyday acts of resistance and counter-conducts are indicative of the emergence of the Egyptian women's ability to eke out an existence against silence and marginalization.

The focus of this paper has been on women's production of everyday acts of resistance, different modes of counter-conduct and persistence that operate through the government of conduct. This has allowed me to revisit the notions of persistence and resistance against the backdrop of power and subjectivity. In this paper, I have analyzed specific moments of women's everyday acts of resistances to conduct. Layla, Narjis, and Kareema do not simply reject the society's power but they resist it by enacting different modes of counter-conduct: communities, asceticism, and parrēsia, which allow them to better understand the power dynamics and consequently modify their relations with the patriarchal figures in their lives and open up new possibilities for action. In changing the gendered power relations through the continuous counter-conduct practices, the three protagonists persist and chip away at patriarchal power and what has been taken for granted as normative.

Examining these modes of counter-conduct and persistence is important as it acknowledges that the governing patriarchal power is not totalizing and that the contrarian voices present different interpretations of the dominant ideas through the production of other modes of being conducted. Highlighting the diversities of persistence and counter-conducts and seeing them as acts of resistance,

women's agency is exercised and confirmed. Al-Zayyat, El Sadaawi, and Bakr have managed to expand our ideas of the meaning of women's persistence in the Egyptian context. They have "spoken" and voiced their anger and frustration; and in doing so, they have challenged the status quo and called for freedom, justice, and equality.

السلوك المضاد والإصرار في نماذج مختارة من الرواية النسائية بمصر

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الملخص

استندت الورقة البحثية إلى نظرية ميشيل فوكو عن السلوك المضاد وجوديث باتلر عن المثابرة والجلد والإصرار لتحليل النصوص الأدبية المختارة لكل من لطيفة الزيات ونوال السعداوي وسلوى بكر اللاتي سعين جاهدات إلى استخدام لغة قادرة على التعبير عن صبر، ومثابرة، وجلد المرأة المصريّة علي مواجهة التحديات المجتمعية. وتهدف الباحثة من استخدام هذا المنهج المزدوج إلى اكتشاف أنماط التعبير والاستراتيجيات المعارضة وأشكال الرفض في رواية *(الباب المفتوح)* للطيفة الزيات والقصتين القصيرتين *(الصورة)* لنوال السعداوي و*(إحدى وثلاثون شجرة جميلة خضراء)* لسلوى بكر، كما تهدف إلى تقييم محاولات البطلات الثلاثة - ليلى ونرجس وكريمة – للخروج عن السلطة الأبويّة المهيمنة بتقديم أشكال متعددة للسلوك المضاد. وتتعدد الطرائق البديلة لكل بطلة بما يتوافق مع الأشكال المتعددة للسلطة التي تؤثر فيها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السلوك المضاد، المثابرة، أعمال المقاومة اليوميّة، القدرة على الفعل، الكتابة النسويّة.

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