



Undaunting Spirit of Female Protagonists in Nawal el Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy* and Patricia McCormick's *Sold*: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

A comparative study provides an apparatus for analysis, and detailed inspection of the similarities and differences in literature across genres, boundaries or time periods. With an increasing globalization, multifarious and countless literary works, it seems superfluous to state that literary comparison stands at the crossroads of contrasting languages, yields an analysis and understanding of world literature justified by the double stakes involved in comparison.

The three novels *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi, *Blasphemy* by Tehmina Durrani and *Sold* by Patricia McCormick invite comparative analysis on the similarity of the atrocities, abuse that the protagonist of the novel undergo, yet the conspicuous differences in their struggle and the exemplary heroism with which they fight back and decide to live life at their own terms. The authors of these celebrated novels have completely different nationalities. This provides an extensive exposure to an entirely different culture, background and socio-political turbulence in the lives of their characters. But depicts a similar perception of the protagonist towards an orthodox society. Their silent agony metamorphose their submissive identity, and finally exudes an aura of solidity.

Keywords- Silent agony, Patriarchy, Feminist, Comparative, Undaunting spirit.

Comparative literature holds back its roots to as early as in 1598. Francis Meres in his book entitled *Palladis Tamia, Wits Treasury* (1598) inspected the comparison and contrast between the great classical Italian poets, the ancient Latin poets, the precursors of English literature with the other poets of the antiquity in a section titled, *A Comparative Discourse of Our English Poets with the Greek, Latin and Italian Poets*. The term Comparative Literature came into prominence in the 19th century with the objective of critically evaluating diverse literatures, history, development of languages, cultural differences across borders with the apparatus of comparison. The influence of any literary work on various writers can be analysed by critically examining the echoes of similarities in distinct literary works. Every literature has its own form, techniques, symbols differing from the other kind of literature, since each one developed in retaliation to the socio-political and political domain. As B. M Matlanyane points out in his book, *The Dynamics Of Race And Gender: Some Feminist Interventions*:

Like most dominant ideologies, the ideology of patriarchy is so powerfully ingrained in our minds and behaviour, so much so that mechanisms of gender oppression tend to be understood and defended, even by some of its victims as the normal tradition, private or family affairs, which must never be questioned. (DRC 3)

Literature can be comprehended as a form of human experiences, creative imagination or literary research which suggest the highest art form due to its artistic value. Different works of literature provides a blueprint about the present status of society. A novel is fictional prose narrative that constitutes a series of action, and characters that depicts social, political or personal facts of a particular region or author. A plot in a novel is of pivotal importance as it links the series of incidences in a sequence of events which directs the story.

The phenomenal rendition of the historic tale of Heer- Ranjha by Waris Shah was published in 1766. The novel *Blasphemy* by Tehmina Durrani depicts the self sacrificing, onerous and arduous life of the protagonist Heer. The name of the protagonist in the novel reminds the readers about the everlasting and epic love story of Heer-Ranjha. Tehmina Durrani who is an Pakistani writer exposes the sexist oppression in a patriarchal society by depicting the life of Heer who is naive and submissive. Heer who is fifteen is married of to a famous holy saint Pir Sain, who is representative of God for the people who worship him for his irrefutable prophecy. Durrani is known around the world as she impetuously exposes the religious clergies and men in power who survive by employing their power to control women.

On the other hand Nawal El Saadawi, an Egyptian writer, also known as the Simone de Beauvoir of the Arab world stands against the unethical practice of female genital mutilation and the reckless oppression of women by the capitalist system supported by religious fundamentalism in Egypt and across the world. In her novel *Women at Point Zero* she questions the society for the stern hypocritical religious beliefs, disparity between the secondary position of women and highest regards to religious doctrines. She portrays the plight of a girl who undergoes genital circumcision in her childhood to make her understand that her body is not hers, it is of the community. In this novel, the structure of dominance is divided into four interrelated spheres of power governing women: the institutional, judicial, hegemonic,

and interpersonal. All four fields play a significant role in the exploitation of the female protagonists. The structural domain organizes exploitation, and is governed by the disciplinary domain. The central character of Saadawi's novel, Firdaus who is on the her way to execution for being a murderess, finally decides to speak her life story. Firdaus has been in imprisonment for long, and has never spoken for her freedom. She is proud of the incessant pain and repeated perfidy that moulds her into an imperishable identity who flamboyantly recalls her journey, and finally orates it to the female psychologist. Firdaus who has a penurious childhood endures genital mutilation when she is young, and later is sexually assaulted by her uncle after her parent's death. Firdaus life is distraught by every male person who enters her life, either to gain certain profits or to satisfy their sexual hunger. She becomes a trifling part of many lives where she gains notoriety and dishonour until she finally decides to take command of her own life. Sandra Lee Bartky in her book *Femininity and Domination* (2015) states:

Feminist consciousness is the experience in a certain way of certain specific contradictions in the social order. This means that the feminist apprehends certain features of social reality as intolerable. . . . The feminist consciousness is the consciousness of victimization. As the philosophy of life it seeks to discover and change the more subtle and deep-seated cause of women's oppression. (FD 23)

On the other hand, *Sold* by Patricia McCormick has similar undertones of suppression and oppression under patriarchal society, but accentuates the subject of trafficking intensely. Patricia McCormick is an American journalist and writer who is known for addressing substantive issues, which have been conveniently neglected by the society. The novel is set in rural Nepal and follows the life story of a thirteen years old girl, Lakshmi who is sold into prostitution by her own step-father. She is trafficked to India where she ends up in Happiness House, a brothel in India. Lakshmi is representative of the countless demure and innocent girls who move out from their homes in search of work and money, but ultimately fall a prey to the false promises made by the traffickers. She can be termed as a survivor, as throughout her journey which was thronged with torment and agony, she does not, at any point loses hope, but remains constant to strive against the vicious circle of repeated assaults. The setting of the three novels foreshadows the events which influence character's behaviour and vividly presents the themes of the novel. *Woman at Point Zero* is primarily set in Egypt. Firdaus is imprisoned in Qanatir prison. Saadawi visit to the famous prison as a psychiatrist reveals the traumatic story of Firdaus. Her childhood is spent with her parents in some part of middle eastern country. After her parents death she moves to Cairo with her uncle who later turns out to be her molester. Saadawi portrays the patriarchal social milieu, oppression and the brutality subjugated to women in Egyptian society. A similar pattern of exploitation and assault is evident in *Tehmina*

Durrani's Blasphemy which is set in South Pakistan. *Tehmina* successfully delineates the religious fundamentalism hegemonising it's rule over destitute. In her novel, Heer is a victim of religious and cultural doctrines that are hurled up her by the patriarchal society. The hypocritical religious leader Pir Sain ensures the easy distortion of Islam in his shrine, which is a domain to sexual assaults, deception and inhuman punishments. The setting of the novel stands in parallel to the subjugation and domination forced upon women in Pakistan. Whether it was Heer, Kali, Guppi, Toti, Tara, Yathimri, Cheel or Pir Sain's own daughter no one dared to moved against his words, and any resistance would lead to extreme punishments that would determent the other followers. While Durrani claims it to be a factual story, the story vividly portrays the reality of Muslim women in Pakistan. She writes about her own country and naturally exposes the traditions and practices that impedes the development of it.

On the contrary Patricia McCormick, who is an American writer, meticulously research the subject of trafficking in India. She moves to different red light areas in India such as Calcutta and Bombay to closely look into the pitiable and deplorable lives of girls and women, trafficked from different corners of the world. She depicts Lakshmi as a rural girl who is burdened under poverty and patriarchy. In the novel, Lakshmi lives with her mother on the mountains in Nepal. The setting of the novel runs parallel to the thought provoking theme of the novel. McCormick aptly sets her novel in Nepal which witnesses maximum number of girls being trafficked.

Nawal El Saadawi begins her novel by giving an introduction of her experience as a psychologist, studying the effect of imprisonment on female prisoner's in Egypt. Her zeal and curiosity makes her meet a doctor in Qanatir prison who inform her about an unusual case of a woman awaiting death penalty for a murder. While the doctor comes forward for help and makes an appeal for pardon, the convict denies any interference and awaits her impending doom. Saadawi's novel begins in present and advances with the recollection of Firdaus past events. A similar pattern is followed in *Blasphemy*. The novel begins in media res. with the death of Pir Sain. It begins in present with the death of Heer's husband, but later takes a retrospective turn with the description of past events of Heer's life. The beginning of the novel is tense and serious. Durrani explains the terror, fright and trepidation that surrounds Heer on the death of her husband who was representative of God on earth.

The beginning in *Tehmina Durrani's Blasphemy* and *Nawal El Saadawi's Woman at Point Zero* follows homogeneous pattern. The critical conditions and grave incidents marks the beginning of the novels which draws the attention of the readers, and also instills a sense of curiosity for the past events.

Patricia McCormick novel *Sold* beginning is unadorned with a explicit description about a thirteen years old girl who is abstained from simple joys of life. McCormick introduces her central figure Lakshmi with a natural introduction. She develops her protagonist in the most natural setting providing picturesque details of the mountain life. Lakshmi who lives on the beautiful Himalayan mountains in Nepal expresses her plight of not having a tin roof.

In the canon of literary work, a piece of literature acquires its structure from narrative techniques and literary structures which in due course makes the work intriguing and riveting. The narrator draws inferences use of various sources, dexterously plans plots and employs various literary devices which enhances the effects of characters, atmosphere, tone and setting. *Woman at Point Zero*, *Blasphemy* and *Sold* can be termed as into creative Nonfiction genre. It follows the hierarchy of dramatic structure but the inferences drawn are based on the writers personal experience. In all the three novels the readers get to feel and understand what the narrator has in mind. Works such as *Virginia Woolf A Rooms of One's Own*, *Schindler's Ark* by Thomas Keneally, *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston are some of the other examples of Creative Nonfiction.

The narration in all the three novels is in first person narrative where the narrator is an active participant. There is an undertone of depression that runs parallel to the story until the climax. *Blasphemy* is written in thirteen chapters followed by an epilogue. The titles of each chapter is redolent and provides the reader with an suggestive insight. The first chapter - *Release* metaphorically describes the release of Heer and all the women who suffered oppression and constant abuse in the realm of Pir Sain. As described by Heer the Haveli turned into a mad house with men and women scrambled to pay their last tribute to their master whose death was both a trauma and release. Each chapter has an indication of the incident it has to unfold.

Chapter two - *Steeping Out* describes Heer's past love for a boy named Ranjha who studies in the same school. It reveals her mother avidity towards Heer's marriage which she feels is the only way to restore their honor in society. It portrays the paranoid status of Heer's

mother in society after the demise of her husband. This chapter portrays Maa's selfishness and ignorance towards the dreadful fate of her own daughter. The third chapter - Steeping In describes Heer's journey of moving out from an innocent, romantic world to an living Hell. She is married to Pir Sain and becomes the mistress of Haveli. She is traumatized by Pir Sain's atrocious cruelties as she describes her first step into her married life, "did I sleep that night or was it some kind of death? . . . the preparations, the rituals, the ceremony and the slaughter. I had been sacrifice to a God on earth. the contract had signed away my life." (BLASPHEMY 39)

Chapter four - Jahanum aptly describes the tormented and agonised life of women associated with Haveli and Pir Sain. It describes Pir Sain vice of lechery and sexual assaults that innocent women tolerate due to his powerful position.

'Unbound' - the fifth chapter where Heer describes the details of her first girl child, "Ordered into purdah at birth, my daughter would remain in prison till her death" (BLASPHEMY 78). She draws a comparison between herself and her younger sisters before whom Heer looks like "a tormented maid at eighteen" with "no youth, no love, no hope" (BLASPHEMY 78). Heer, also narrates the mysterious appearance of a old woman named Toti. Toti, a maidservant, appears and vanishes only to reveals dark sins of Pir Sain buried inside Haveli. While in the sixth chapter 'Circling the Square', Heer becomes aware about the reality of Toti who was actually a spirit and an innocent victim of Pir Sain's abuse. This chapter is an account of Heer's retrospection.

The Lure of Innocence depicts Pir Sain's callous and lewd desires towards his own daughter, Guppi and how Heer offers Yathimri to her husband to save her own daughter from incest. Yathimri, an orphan, and many other smaller girls of maid servants were assaulted by Pir Sain to satiate his lust. Chapter Eight 'Chote Sain', Heer discovers the evil plans of Yathimri who cunningly forces herself onto Chote Sain. Heer is devastated and frightened to breath. Chote Sain turns out to be a real saint for the people, and a threat to Pir Sain. He is killed by her own father who has sensed a danger. Chapter Nine, 'Killer Waves', illustrates the unimaginable waves of impious and heinous acts by Pir Sain. The chapter gives details about the lewd and pornographic content that Heer and other two girls is forced to watch obscene films.

Tenth chapter 'Heroes' is filled with evocative details of sexual assaults wherein Heer is offered to unknown, dirty and filthy strangers to make video films by Pir Sain. He introduces Heer as a whore named Piyari from the city to different Jamindars, officials, and men from the city. This chapter also traces Heer's embarrassment on meeting a handsome hero who later turns out to be Ranjha. The following chapter 'In the Name of Allah' unfolds the mystery behind Pir Sain's death while the twelfth chapter entitled as 'Stripping' describes Heer's quest to strip off the false facade of religious dogmas by deciding to disclose her identity. It shows Rajaji dastarbandi ceremony where he is offered the place of his father. It exposes the reason of Cheel's loyalty to Pir and the Shrine, and Ranjha resolution to marry Maharani, who was her sister. Chapter thirteen, 'Shattering the Myth' describes Heer's ardent and persistent efforts to expose Heer frantically searching for her pious identity that had been maligned by her own husband. She finally dies to live a life of freedom and love. The last chapter is an 'Epilogue' which discloses Heer's return to Ranjha and her successful efforts to unveil the sins in the shrine system.

In Woman at Point Zero there is contrast between the mood and tone of Psychiatrist and Firdaus. The Psychiatrist section is investigative and eager. She repeatedly appeals to meet Firdaus, who rejects it indifferently. The Psychiatrist is anxious, impatient and serious to know about the woman prisoner who is declared as a murderess. Whereas Firdaus section is calm, reflective and filled with pride. She stand on the verge of death, and hence no regret of her conscious decision of killing the man who shattered and wrecks her life. The tone and mood is disheartening and reflective until Firdaus reaches her point to break free all the shackles of patriarchal society.

Firdaus is eventually married to an old man named Sheikh Mahmoud. He criticizes Firdaus by caustic masculine comments when she returns back to him after running away from his violent beatings. He lambaste the distortion of his will and berates her with humiliating and accusing words annihilating her sense of self-worth.

Firdaus and her mother are molested by their husbands as they were economically dependent on them. The implication of the world of master and slave, is maintained through deprivation of economic deprivation forcing the women to acts as slave. Firdaus finally decides to run away from her husband house who repeatedly molests her.

Firdaus fearlessly stands against the norms of patriarchy. At the same time imperialism and colonialism are joining forces to exploit Firdaus from top to bottom. She lives in a patriarchal society where men rule women, and both are united in agreeing to this through various fields such as family, marriage, faith, community, politics, economics and others.

In Sold the tone and mood changes variably. The opening scenes describes the beauty of mountain life with an undertone of gloominess. There are various symbols used by McCormick to illustrate and lay emphasis on the seriousness of the subject. A tin roof is symbolic of prosperity and luxury. Lakshmi is jealous of her friend Geeta who works in city and has a tin roof. Lakshmi's mother asserts that they are bound to accept the traditions and follow the commands of their husbands as she declares, "this has always been our fate," she says. 'Simply to endure,' she says, 'is to triumph' (17).

The structural functions in a literary work is performed by the protagonist who play a crucial role to generate a specific response by significant actions. The term protagonist was derived in the late 17th century from the Greek word protagonistes, from 'protos' that stands for first in importance and 'agonistes' meaning actor. The protagonist affects the plots, twists and turns substantially more than the other characters in the novel.

While all of the three novels have drastic differences in their settings, socio cultural norms or the tragedies in the lives of the protagonist, but show similarities in enduring the silent agonies, and courageously fighting against the evil. The comparative analysis of these novels delineates the subjugation, and socially abhorrent practices that corrupt the society. These novel can be justified to have coming of the age is a prominent theme, since all the three protagonist resurrect after suffering indefinitely, and learning ways to forge their own identity through tough lessons.

There are some common themes in Blasphemy, Woman at Point Zero and Sold that provides these novels both universal appeal and raises an urgent voice against the hypocritical doctrines perpetrated in the society. The most prominent theme is one woman against the orthodox patriarchal society. Whether it is Heer, Firdaus or Lakshmi, each one of them have battled through life's austerity and societies authoritarianism.

The day Heer marries Pir Sain, she becomes an object for her husband. Her body serves as an object for Pir's sexual gratification and bizarre fantasies. Her conjecture about Pir Sain as a loving husband were shattered on the very first night of her marriage. There are various examples of similar exploitation of women in African-American novels like Color Purple by Alice Walker and The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison where brutal physical intimacy blights the emotional sensitivity of a woman with the opposite gender, and leads to repugnance towards physical intimacy.

In Blasphemy, the quintessence of suffering is not race but that of orthodox society, religion and gender. Similarly Nawal El Saadawi blatantly illustrates how societies wrecks religious doctrines to restrict women from receiving education which acts as a source to freedom

and respect in society. Firdaus's uncle precisely remarks that it is an outrageous thought to send her to the university to acquire education as she would be sitting next to men. Firdaus's uncle who considers himself to be a respected Sheikh is incapable of permitting her to get comfortable in the company of men. This depicts the shallow reasoning of men to put an end to woman's education, and distraught their economic stability since it may serve as a medium of freedom from masculine yoke.

Education can serve as a medium to liberate an imprisoned soul caught in the web of religious or economic instability. As pointed out by Joanna Williams in her novel *Women VS Feminism*:

In the past a combination of socialization and coercion meant girls were denied the access to the same educational opportunities as boys. girls were less likely to study a full range of academic subjects; they achieve lower exam results and did not carry on to the university at the same rate as men. Feminist successfully challenged the low expectations schools and teachers held for girls, and today, as this chapter shows, a very different picture emerges. at every stage of their education, girls are now outperforming boys and yet the influence of feminism on education shows no sign of diminishing. (WVSF 16)

In *Sold*, Patricia McCormick limns how education is a luxury and not a basic right for those burdened under poverty. The fundamental cause of female subordination is their indifference to education and financial dealings. McCormick emphasises the need of education, as she crafts the character of Lakshmi who is lost in burdensome task which a women is suppose to execute throughout her life, she greatly adores her school and notebook. Once sold into brothel, her notebook acts as an escape from an unending cycle of abuse, exploitation and torment. Lakshmi highlights that any form of action that challenges male hegemony is wiped off from the lives of women. Education, with its elite awareness, bridges the gap between a powerful man and an ordinary woman. The fact that Lakshmi carries her used notebook which her teacher gave her for being the number one girl in school inside her bundle on way to her new master's house suggest its importance and gravity in her life. She is a survivor of trafficking, and undergoes extreme form of assaults as she enters Happiness House. Lakshmi befriends Harish, who is the son of Pushpa, a victim in the brothel. Harish helps Lakshmi learn new words which eventually helps her in understanding the pretence of Mumtaz and finally escaping the brothel.

All the three novels have the same intolerable levels of tribulation in form of slavery affecting the journey of the protagonists. Using maidservants as objects is a self-constructed prerogative of higher castes Muslims as that depicted of Pir Sain's family in the novel. This scenario in the novel strongly reflect the dreadful times of slavery which was prevailing in a pre-Islamic era wherein female slaves were treated like that of objects for satiating the sexual hunger. The Haveli becomes a shelter to many helpless women, and a hidden brothel for those who live under the dictates of Pir Sain. Pir Sain eventually tries to molest his own daughter. Yathimri is brutally assaulted by Pir Sain's sexual lust. As pointed out by Marisa J. Fuentes in her book, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*:

As identifying mask, the scar on enslaved bodies signify different meanings for various group of people within Barbados slave society. For the colonial authorities they served as punishment for the victim and terror to the enslaved population. For the enslaved they confirmed ones condition of captivity and this "body memory" - the permanent marks and meanings inscribed on the body - also transferred knowledge of enslavement to future generations. (DP 16)

In *Woman at Point Zero*, Nawal El Saadawi depicts Firdaus to be of lower class, whose father is a farmer. She notices the subjugation of her mother at her father's will, and eventually turns to perform the same. The incidence where her mother narrates the act of washing of her father's leg, and teaching Firdaus to remain subservient to her husband reveals the utmost display of supremacy of male over women.

Women themselves teach their own daughter to accept male domination as a part of their being. Firdaus mentions how she saw herself, naturally taking over to the dictates of men in her lives. The circle of slavery is indoctrinated in the society, and made to be persistent.

Saadawi displays how Firdaus is left helpless before her uncle who practice his man centric force by marrying her to Sheik Mahmoud for settlement without getting her to agree to clear his obligation. Marriage was viewed as a sort of business in return of a virgin girl for endowment. The repercussions of such marriage prompting the thought of ladies as close to home property bought through an exchange, depreciating her and giving men the approval to do what they please as per their impulse is accentuated.

Firdaus uncovers the twofold standard of men who anticipate that women should be upright, yet keeps on misusing them making them stagger to the absolute bottom. Similarly, *Sold* is a survival narrative, a heart-rendering account of trafficking an thirteen years old girl. Lakshmi is sold to Mumtaz, who is cruel, and heartless. She starves Lakshmi, who is not ready to comply to her dictates of selling her body as a commodity. When Mumtaz notices Lakshmi's unwavering refusal, she drugs her to fulfill her will. Lakshmi turns into an sexual slave who is ruined into the hands of another woman. McCormick portrays how Lakshmi lived long periods of interior battle to pick between her dire fundamental needs, and her resistance from accepting to be a prostitute.

This drove her to frame a paragon of her personality when she declined this offer. The inner intensity of Lakshmi upheld her personality and conquered the savagery of Mumtaz. The response of Lakshmi to this strategy was not anticipated from a young lady who never imagined that she may be dehumanized that way. She utilized a few strategies that helped her oppose the bait of nourishment, for example, tying her abdomen so as to beguile and trick her stomach that she was not hungry. McCormick utilizes language both melodious and spare to lead the reader into this profoundly grieved and disturbing world of trafficking and slavery. As proposed by Diane Elam in her book *Feminism and Deconstruction*:

Feminism as thematic criticism tends to forget the variety of inflections of feminism. for some feminism means equal pay, abortion rights, and a partnership in law firm. for others feminism means a celebration of women as separate and distinct from men. for others still, feminism is a subversive ideology used to undermine the authority and create alternative power structures.

All the three protagonist Firdaus, Heer and Lakshmi embark on their journey, and come across varied instances that transform their silent agony and embark a spirit of grit that helps them find new meanings to life, and eventually transforms them into indomitable identities. The authors not only have similar undertones of weaving a war against the dictates of a patriarchal society, but also unveils the hidden facades of those in power. These authors can be termed as feminist to have marched against the dictates of religious customs that oppress and abuse women.

It accentuates an urgent need to lay emphasis to the distortion of women in the hands of men. Whether it is Heer, Firdaus or Lakshmi, each of them had an undaunting spirit to fight the atrocities that the society inflicted on them. They evolve themselves through the continuous assaults, sufferings, and eventually crafts an aesthetic path for others to follow. They lead their own lives without any regrets and boldly challenges those ideologies that oppresses women, and allows men to rule over their bodies.

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