PROSTITUTION AS INDEPENDENCE FROM MEN

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Throughout the centuries, women have been made to play the shadow of the men. The rights of the women have been stifled by the society. The male counterparts have been made to have all the say on all the decisions including those that directly affect the women like their sexuality. This paper focuses on the Latin America and Arabia societies because of their cultural practices that deny the women the right to make decisions. This work focuses on the feminist argument regarding the freedom of the woman. The women in the reconstruction era did not have a say on their sexuality. The man was the absolute decision-maker and head of the family. The Woman at Point Zero by the Egyptian feminist and writer Nawal El Saadawi and Eleven Minutes by the Brazilian author Paulo Coelho bring out an argument about the role of prostitution in the society. According to these two writers, prostitution to a woman is a form of independence from man.

Eleven Minutes is a more recent work, and being published in 2003 renders it less subject to be studied by scholars. Another reason for less criticism about Coelho’s work is that the opinion critics have of him; he writes for popular taste. In an interview Glauco Ortolando stated “I had received some severe criticism from more conservative critics for his work, including The Alchemist which has been in the top-ten list of Brazilian novels for the past twenty years. Why is it then that some critics opposed his election to the Academy or the selection of his works as some of the best examples of contemporary Brazilian literature? I suspect that some of these critics simply disparage Coelho’s narrative simplicity” (Ortolando
Eleven Minutes is a story about a young prostitute from Brazil known as Maria. The story of this girl begins with her brief encounter with love that leaves her heart broken. This leads her to the opinion that love is a terrible thing that leaves one with a painful experience to deal with. In pursuit of fame and fortune, Maria leaves Rio for Geneva where she ends up working as a prostitute. Her new-found fascination with sex draws her further away from love. As a fate would have it, she finds herself at a crossroad when she meets a young painter and develops feelings of love towards him. Maria is torn between continuing with her part or settling down by believing in love again. She takes her own path to sexual awakening that threatens to destroy her.

Paulo Coelho is unorthodox of his views of sexuality. The prominent writer of Brazil Gabriel Garcia Marquez who was open minded of prostitutes is not as open as Coelho. Diane E. Marting in her paper states “while several of Gracia Marquez’ works feature characters who are matriarchs, powerful women whose concerns nevertheless revolve around children, church, and kitchen…few have neglected to mention prostitutes, and early criticism often remarked that his portrayal was partial, negative, conservative or realistic” (Marting 178). She then declares that Marquez is criticizing the sex industry but not the sex workers nor the men if they do not abuse the women (Marting 179). Critics have the opinion that Marquez is sympathetic to prostitutes. Paulo Coelho is going a higher level bringing respect to prostitutes by not even looking at them as victims. In Coelho’s plot the sex industry is a lucrative business that offers women an opportunity to pursue emotional, sexual and financial freedom. The industry in Geneva as described in the text is efficient and well run industry. However, the community does not approve of the industry and prostitution is believed to be dangerous. This concept is depicted through the female librarian’s view of the industry. The fact that Maria dose not tell her although she considers her a friend is an indication that prostitution has not been fully accepted in Europe. “This argument is going to base your work on? I said:
on women who feel free enough to earn their living making love. He said: that won’t work; we call such women prostitutes” (Coelho 156). The notion here is that this subject of research is not respected by intellectuals and hence would not sell. It seems that the director is judging that prostitution is looked at as a field that is not respected by the community. People do not share Maria’s view that prostitution is a form of freedom. The Maria’s response can be understood to be Coelho’s opinion of the industry. “I’m going to study their history and create something more intellectual, more to the taste of the families who visit your museum. It’s all a question of culture” (Coelho 156).

Coelho emphasizes on old cultures and how they depict women working in prostitution. He provides detailed information about the history of prostitution and how different communities looked at sex workers. He provides some examples of some women who were considered heroines for using their sex appeal to seek for their freedom from the shadows of men. “Some ended up ruling nations, as Messalina did in Rome; others become legendary figures, like Madame du Barry; still others chase after adventure and misfortune, like the spy, Mata Hari. But the majority have their moment of glory” (Coelho 202). The later character mentioned in the quote became the protagonist of the latest novel published by the same author in 2016, *The Spy*.

According to Paulo Coelho, sex trafficking is a choice for women whose desire is to attain financial freedom. No one forces Maria to work in the sex industry but she is driven to do so by her need to get money fast so that she can return to her country. In the beginning, she is hesitant to work in this field but later on she becomes to respect the profession. In addition, the brothel that Maria works at is given a Brazilian name by the author and it is mentioned that Maria meets several Brazilian women there. To feminists, sex traffic and prostitution are controversial issues. “Researches have demonstrated that the motivations of migrant sex workers are varied and often cannot clearly be divided into voluntary and forced.
However, for abolitionists feminists, who define prostitution as de facto exploitation and sexual abuse, and therefore impossible for women freely to choose, these distinctions are meaningless” (Hamilton 90). Paulo Coelho is definitely aware of these views and his depiction of the situation is realistic. Maria states in her diary that she was not forced to this field but feels sad her circumstances directed her to this path. However, she reasons with herself that no one ends up doing the profession they like and no one is happy. It seems that even though the community does not respect this work, yet it is a job that some women must do. As Hamilton notes, while abolitionists use diaries written by prostitutes to show the danger of the field, Paulo Coelho uses the same method to show a positive view of the industry using the prostitute’s diary. The hesitation, desperation and disappointment that Maria goes through when she begins working in the field is probably because she comes from a village in Brazil whose cultural background does not tolerate engaging in such an activity.

According to Hamilton, “the third wave of feminism is sometimes associated with phenomena such as consumerism, independence and individualism. It emphasized on the women’s professional achievements, sexual pleasures and material acquisition” (Hamilton 91). Paulo Coelho depicts Maria as a materialistic girl when he notes that as soon as she earns money from her new profession, she buys herself a TV. She adopts the consumerism ideology and starts to act like the upper middle class. For instance, buying magazines about celebrities, a life style that epitomizes the phenomena Hamilton describes. Hamilton further discusses what post feminists embraced in cyberspace. He talks about female sex blogs that are detailing female sex life. “They are also characterized by a spirit of adventure, and emphasis on developing personal knowledge through experience, and an impulse towards pleasure which is balanced by a concern with relationships” (Hamilton 92).

Having different sex acts with various men develops Maria's self-awareness. She realizes that she has the power to control her sex life. Maria also becomes aware of her power
as a woman, which she could use to control men. Coelho could be suggesting that one of the reasons why some women are facing difficulty having relationships with men because they don’t know the power of sex. Therefore, having sexual experiences with many different men would solve this problem. By implying that having sex with multiple partners is a solution for women who want to realize self-awareness, the writer is endorsing prostitution. Coelho’s concern with formal relationships is clear in the contrast that Maria feels being approached when she is dancing. “It was the fault of the Swiss, who hate to bother anyone, and other foreigners, who were all afraid of being arrested for ‘sexual harassment’, a concept that made relations between men and women even more complicated” (Coelho 46-47).

On the other hand, something that might be said about women portrayed in El Sadawi’s novel but not Coelho’s is what Zucker mentions in her paper: “Golly calls a community of oppressed women, recognizing and acknowledging women from her local communities, developing alliances with other prisoners” (Zucker 241). It is sensed that Firdaus considers women as victims of men and doesn’t see them as her enemy. The fact that we don’t see Firdaus commenting on or confronting Sharifa for using her but nonetheless fights against the male pimp suggests that. Her relationship with Wafeya and Iqbal, her relationship with the maid at her uncle’s house, and above all her relationship with the female warder and then agreeing to talk to the female psychiatrist to carry her message to the world are some examples that prove her alliance with women. In Eleven Minutes, the relationship between Maria and the other sex workers is professional. At some point, Maria narrates an incident of two sex workers fighting over a customer. That scene shows how much women are independent because no one is choosing their customers for them like the case with Marzouk and Firdaus. The fight between the two sex workers at the brothel represents the free market. It represents women's freedom to choose whom to give their services to. Firdaus only experiences that kind of freedom when she kills the male pimp by whom she is used and
locked inside the house and forced to have sex with men she did not comply to. Although she
is satisfied with the men she meets under Sharifa’s supervision, yet she does not have full
control like Maria.

_Eleven Minutes_ is characterized by third wave feminism. It is in deep contrast to
second wave feminism texts like _Woman at Point Zero_. The character in this book enjoys
more freedom in Europe, attempts to write her diary for making a book about her experience.
It is not clear why, since Coelho published the novel in 2003, does not discuss or even
mention the fact that Maria could publish her testimony via the web. However, the testimony
made by Maria in _Eleven Minutes_ is different from that of Firdaus’s. Maria attempts to
publish her own book of her experience with men before and when she becomes a prostitute.
Therefore, Coelho views of prostitution are more positive, which makes him a third wave
feminist.

Women in the second wave of feminism seem to have less freedom as compared to
those in the third wave of feminism. El Saadawi’s criticism of the society is apparent in her
work. She portrays her character as someone who is focused on her traumatic sexual
experience with men. On the other hand, Maria does not hesitate to describe the sexual act
and the pleasure she feels with the manager she escorts and the artist with whom she later
falls in love. Moreover, Maria, when writing her diary, does not narrate any abuse except of
the first encounter with the manager when he wants to tie her up to meet his sexual fantasies.
Later, when she goes with him the second time she gets intense sexual pleasure when the
manager uses the back of his whip to make her attain orgasm. Throughout his book, Coelho
seems to support prostitution except for one time. Implicitly prostitution is criticized when
Maria hears one of her coworkers advise her to leave the field while she can. Thereafter, she
begins to read materials on farming and starts saving to buy a land for her family in Brazil.
Woman at Point Zero is a tale of the encounters that Saadawi had with a female inmate in Qanatir Prison. Firdaus agrees to talk about her life journey before being prosecuted. The story highlights the issues of male dominance, female circumcision and oppression of women by the Arabic Society. Firdaus’ first encounter with sex is with a young boy known as Mohammadain. She is still a young girl working around home when this happens. Shortly after, the mother sends a woman who performs Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) on her. Upon the death of her parents, the young girl is sent to live with her uncle who also develops sexual interest in her. The two develop a mutual sexual relationship, which continues until the man gets married. The ensuing tension between her and her uncle’s wife leads to the decision of sending Firdaus to a boarding school. Upon arrival, she meets a female teacher, Miss Iqbal, for whom she feels sexual attraction. The latter refuses to reciprocate. After school, Firdaus is married off to an older man who treats her like his slave. She runs away and ends up in a brothel. The story of this woman is a story of someone who has been treated as a sex object by men hence leading to rebellion. She finds prostitution to be a good place to exercise free sexuality. Inioibong I. Uko in the study “Womanhood, sexuality, and Work The Dialectic of Exploitation Flora Nawapa, Nawal El Saadawi, and Ama Ata Aidoo”, briefly touches on the novel by El Saadawi. In her survey, she comes out with the result that Firdaus “has either been sexually exploited or has had to deploy her sexuality to enhance her sense of selfhood, satisfy her interests, and achieve material goals” (Uko 10). The paper focuses on men’s and women’s view of sexuality at work. The writer does not discuss further Firdus’s work in prostitution but she does acknowledge that Firduas uses her sexuality for her benefits. However, the critic does not clearly state if the work in the sex industry is empowering for Firdaus although she does define the killing of Marzouk, the male pimp, as a demonstration that her sexuality is under her control. Yet, I see that she concentrates on Firdaus being exploited by men. Also, Zucker declares that the killing of the
pimp is a powerful act on Firdaus’ side as it is a challenge to masculine authority. But she attributes masculine traits to her which makes her oppose the authority; “El Saadawi presents Firdaus as not an ordinary woman, characterizing her at once with qualities nuanced with masculinity” (Zucker 241). The critic does state that Firdaus gets financial independence and control over her body working as a prostitute but she does not see that empowering the way I see it. She sees that as the only option for Fridaus to gain power. She claims that “in this highly regulated cultural context, with virtually no choice regarding access to her body, Firdaus is fair game to any man who desires her. Thus, she considers prostitution” (Zucker 244). It seems that Zucker believes that only in the case of a woman who is violated and raped “in the context of Firdaus’s life, then, the choice to become a prostitute makes perfect sense. Because men have used her body freely, to satisfy their own desires, she decides to get paid for what has always been taken from her” (Zucker 245). Furthermore, in the article entitled, “Women’s Rights and The Lure of Self-Determination in Nawal El Saadawi’s Woman at Point Zero” chapter Sexuality, Pain, and the Human, the critic claims that the circumcision Firdaus has is not a hindrance for her sexuality. She states that, “likewise, her experiences of love and intimacy, romantic as well as platonic, refute the corresponding logic of dignity, freedom and self-determination” (Anker 138). Then, Anker discusses Firdaus’ quest for sexual pleasure with failure; “Firdaus tries fruitlessly to undergo sexual pleasure, and, despite her disappointment, her narrative adopts a tone that is almost euphoric” (Anker 142). The critic asserts that the reason for Firdaus to become a prostitute is to fill a vacuity. “El Saadawi implicitly sanctions it for legislating a matrix of interlocking structures of servitude and oppression” (Anker 146). I think many writers acknowledge that prostitution brings some freedom for Firdaus but see that the sex industry is a choice that Firdaus is forced into. However, it seems that El Saadawi sees the industry as empowering Firdaus since Firdaus is a female that commits murder, an action that Zucker attributes to masculinity.
Firdaus is empowered by using her feminine body and beauty in the sex industry. When the psychiatrist goes to see Firdaus, she has a conversation with the male doctor at the Qanatir prison; “I do not really feel she is a murderer. If you look into her face, her eyes, you will never believe that so gentle a woman can commit murder. Who says murder does not require that a person be gentle?” (El Saadawi 4). Firdaus represents a woman who can do anything. I believe that both writers El Saadawi and Coelho are feminists who have positive views of the industry expressed in the two novels. Nonetheless, I am explaining in what ways the industry is empowering as expressed in Eleven Minutes and Woman at Point Zero.

Women view lack of freedom as a result of the weaknesses in the patriarchal society. The society grants men more power to make decisions on behalf of women including on how they should live their lives. Firdaus makes a statement against the patriarchal government and society by deciding to give her testimony to the female psychiatrist only the night before her execution. What makes Woman at Point Zero one of the critical texts in the second wave feminism is the severity of critique of the community and government. Firdaus does not trust the psychiatrist at first. This appears in the conversation between the psychiatrist and the warder when she wonders why the prisoner would not talk to her. The warder asks her angrily to leave the prisoner alone. The psychiatric recounts the discussion she has with the warder, which brings out the intensity of the male dominance. “Did they send you to her?” asked the warder. To which the psychiatric responded, “Whom do you mean by they? I have nothing to do with the authorities either here or any other place. She looked around cautiously, almost with fear, and stepped back away from me” (El Saadawi 5). Firdaus’ testimony is a revolt against the patriarchal society. By telling her story to the psychiatrist, she tries to create a political action. Hamilton states in her paper that giving testimony could be hindered by trauma and social silences (Hamilton 87). Firdaus narrates her accounts of
suffering and trauma through the psychiatrist because her testimony would not leave the cell in papers form. Therefore, it is narrated through the psychiatrist acting as a journalist.

El Saadawi criticizes male dominance in the society which she believes to be contributing to the lack of freedom for women. The patriarchal society denies women the freedom to make decisions regarding their sexuality. Throughout the novel, she keeps touching on this issue. On the other hand, Maria is not treated as a commodity because she has the freedom to end a relationship with a man. This is a freedom Firdaus only has when she starts working in prostitution under the female pimp. However, the patriarchal society still refuses to give her freedom over her body. The male pimp takes away all her freedom and forces her to go with clients. El Saadawi is very critical of her male-led society. The male pimp symbolizes the epitome of male rule, which is unfavorable to the female. Harris explains that “marriage is traditionally a relation between two men (a husband and a father in law), within which the wife/daughter is exchangeable property” (Harris 127). It is clear that Firdaus has always been a commodity to be exchanged between men. Her uncle and her husband are the first examples of the patriarchy of the society in Egypt. Firdaus the woman is seen by her uncle as the commodity that will draw him nearer to his wife’s relative. “And why should he refuse indeed? Through this marriage he will become related to a respected Sheikh and man of religion” (El Saadawi 50). El Saadawi is showing a kind of homoeroticism or homo-social bond in this quote. This quote also reflects that Firdaus is treated as a commodity to create a relationship between two male figures. The exchange of Firdaus is not only for financial gain for the stingy uncle but also for homo-social bond to bring status.

Even the male pimp disturbs the little independence that Firdaus has by intervening in her job. In this case, Firdaus loses control over her body. She again finds herself being used as a commodity for the pleasure of men. Here, El Saadawi declares that women are not free
in Egypt. Firdaus expresses her feeling of helplessness when she expresses how she feels when Bayoumi rapes her. “I kept my eyes closed and abandoned my body. It lay there under him without movement, emptied of all desire, or pleasure, or even pain” (El Saadawi 67). Firdaus does not own her body anymore because even pain can be a way of resistance. The idea that women are passive and men are active is noted by the French feminist Helen Cixous (Harris 128). Harris proceeds to explain that Sedgwick believes that “women are merely the passive means by which men breed male heirs for the gratification of other men” (Harris 129). This can be seen in the relationship that Firdaus has with Fawzy. Firdaus hears him say to Sharifa that he needs to get married to Firdaus because he is getting old and needs to breed. The statement denotes that in this patriarch society, a woman is a passive means for a man to gratify the community. Her only worth would be her tender age and her fertility. As a result of being continuously used by men, Firdaus loses her fertility. There is no hint in the novel that she plans to get pregnant. Firdaus is raped constantly and this could have contributed to her never bearing children.

Anti-prostitution Feminists are usually against sex trafficking because it enslaves the woman. El Saadawi probably is aware of this issue that is why she chooses the setting to be in Egypt. Although Firdaus is raped, yet she is never forced into prostitution. It seems that El Saadawi makes this the climax for her character. If she is forced into prostitution, then her body is not hers anymore. Therefore, killing the pimp is a revolt since she would not allow the only thing that gives her freedom to be stolen from her. In bringing out this argument, El Saadawi seems to understand the way the sex industry operates. According to her, the sex work itself is not a threat to the freedom and identity of Firdaus’s body and sexuality; rather the control of them by the male pimp is the threat to freedom. El Saadawi, by introducing the idea of the character working with a manager, creates the misconception that Firdaus owns her body. Firdaus attracts many costumers and this results in a lot of financial gain. However,
the sex workers are missing in personal fulfillment. We can see this in the conversation Sharifa has with Fawzy. “You neither love, nor marry. All you want to do is to take her away from me, just as you took Camelia away before” (El Saadawi 79). The anger expressed by Sharifa demonstrates that there is no great growth in the industry in Egypt. That could be attributed to acts of banning practiced by the authority over the industry. Firdaus and Camelia are rare which renders them pricier.

The Egyptian society puts the interests of men first before women's. It is the duty of women to please men sexually. Pleasure of the intercourse is meant for men even at the expense of women. Firdaus talks about this issue when she narrates the relationship between her and her mother. “And instead of staying by my side to keep me warm, my mother used to abandon me alone and go to my father to keep him warm” (El Saadawi 22). Although Firdaus recalls this incident from her childhood, using the word warm in one sentence could have multiple meanings; sexual, emotional or even physical. However, Firdaus could have used this word with a sexual meaning. El Saadawi brilliantly plays with the literal and metaphorical meaning of the same adjective. It seems that Firdaus is getting homoerotic sensations from her mother’s warmth and body contact. If this is a state of infantilism, it is a reversed one since Firdaus is jealous over her mother rather than her father (Harris 124). To remember her mother with that incident could lead us to think that Firdaus is still in the infantilism stage. The incident where she allows the house cleaner to sleep with her in the bed and then be beaten by her uncle’s wife asserts that the Egyptian society believes that normative sexual behavior can go through perversity or deviation. Firdaus also struggles to look for her identity. When having a conversation with her friend Wafeya, she listens to her talking about her sweetheart while she chooses to talk about the future. She does not talk about Mohammadain or her uncle because that is not her identity. She chooses to speak about the future because only in the future could she curve an identity. Prostitution is providing
Firdaus an experience where she could get out of the infantilism stage. Throughout the novel Firdaus explains that she goes numb whenever she has sex with her husband or Bayoumi. That changes when she serves Fawzy. He shows understanding of her pain. Her profession helps in creating interest in Stranger men rather than being fixed on relatives like her uncle and mother. Even her attachment to her teacher Iqbal is not mentioned anymore once she starts her profession in prostitution.

Also, according to Eleven Minutes, Prostitution provides women with the opportunity to experiment with both male and female partners hence leading to a better understanding of their sexual orientation. Maria comes from the rural parts of Brazil. Her life in Geneva and her work in prostitution make her think about her sexual life. Implicitly Maria educates herself about her sexuality through reading sex-related materials. Her failure to have a successful kiss with her boyfriend, her boyfriend’s betrayal, and her discovery of masturbation makes her confused about her sexual identity. Through her reading, she starts to wonder if her sexual enjoyment in her clitoris is an indication of being a lesbian. This suggests that Maria is questioning her sexual orientation. Working as a sex worker helps her to have a better understanding of her sexual identity because later she does enjoy sex with one of her clients. Coelho does not discuss homosexuality in detail because it is treated somehow similarly in Brazil as in Arabia. We do not have much evidence in the text but it could be an indication that Maria is confused about her sexuality because she struggles with her relationships with men. It seems that she is confused, thus she tries to understand why she fails to get sexual pleasure from normal sexual encounter. The fact that she is a sex worker being with different men and yet has to fake orgasms disturbs her. In his book Harris mentions quotes the queer theorist Lee Edelman “queerness can never define an identity, it can only ever disturb one” (Harris 124). Furthermore, Maria through prostitution meets Ralph, an unusual artist with whom she could understand more about her body.
industry as Coelho implicitly points out, one can bring the fantasies into action with anyone. In this quote, Maria talks about an important aspect of her sexual act with Ralph “then I knew that we were made for each other, because he could be a woman as he was now, and I could be a man…and suddenly, a kind of light exploded inside me. I was no longer myself, but a being infinitely superior to everything I knew…I was woman and man, he was man and woman.” (Coelho 260,261, 262). Coelho repeats this idea of switching roles between a man and a woman in the bedroom. Even if Coelho does not mean it in a sexual way. That is to say, Maria is in merge with her lover to the point that they become sexless. In my opinion, she loses the urge to have a certain identity and so does Ralph. Here lies the equality where she does not feel that she has to play a certain role to please the community because this sex act is just between her and her lover. Maria completely owns her body because Ralph loves her even with the knowledge that she is a sex worker. Here he chooses her even with the knowledge that she might deny him her body. In this quote Maria asks Ralph “what made you fall in love with a prostitute?” and he answers” I did not understand it myself at the time. But I’ve thought about it since, and I think it was because, knowing that your body would never be mine alone, I had to concentrate on conquering your soul” (Coelho 263,264). I claim the same realization Maria reaches as Firdaus. Prostitution provides her with a better understanding of her sexuality. Through the sex industry, Maria meets Ralph who makes her get orgasms because he knows how to treat her. In addition, the orgasms she has with him helps her understand her body and its needs.

Even though Maria meets Ralph whom she falls in love with, yet she knows that relying on romance and love is weakening. Maria after her experience in prostitution explains; “films never tell you what happens next, she thought trying to console herself. Marriage, cooking, children, ever more infrequent sex, the discovery of the first note from his mistress, the decision to confront him, his promise that it will never happen again, the
second note from another mistress, another confrontation and this time a threat to leave him, this time the man reacts less vehemently and merely tells her that he loves her. The third note from a third mistress and the decision to say nothing, to pretend that she knows nothing, because he might tell her that he does not love her anymore that she is free to leave. No, films never show that. They finish before the real world begins” (Coelho 266). Here Maria realizes the reality of love, relationships and romance from an early age because of her experience. She is the one who serves men who are married and probably their wives do not know. This quote hints that Maria gains freedom once she does not open her heart. She protects her body and heart from abuse easily by being careful when serving her clients, but if she expects a lot from men then she might get hurt. Maria is explaining that in prostitution she becomes to realize that her experience with men makes her aware that she should be less dreamy. It is empowering because she is becoming mature through experiencing sexuality with men.

Working in the sex industry is providing her an ability to observe men and their behavior. She is not blinded by love. In her experience in this profession, she has the opportunity to observe men and thus has a better understanding of their needs.

Just like Coelho, Nawal El Saadawi briefly touches on the female homosexuality and the importance of prostitution in determining a woman’s sexual orientation. The relationship that Firdaus has with her teacher Iqbal can be understood as an attempt to define her identity in terms of sexual orientation. Besides their quest to determine sexual identity, Firdaus and Maria are thirsty for love and attention. They want desperately to be loved. In my opinion, the lack of attention that Firdaus craves, makes her look for it with a woman that is her teacher Iqbal. Maria never has any emotional attachment to any female she meets in the novel. This is an indication that in the West there is less confusion about sexual orientation. We do not see Maria clinging to any woman who is a friend or coworker. She knows that she is not attracted sexually to women. Her only problem is that she could not move the sexual pleasure
form the clitoris to the vagina. On the other hand, Firdaus is more confused. We see her talking to her friend about Iqbal and drawing the attention of Wafeya to ask her if she loves Iqbal. The exclamation Firdaus gives is an indication of confusion; “but she’s a woman. How could I be in love with a woman?” (El Saadawi 41). It could also be an indication of the way the community understands the relationship between homosexuals. Firdaus seems to be attached to Iqbal but we cannot know if it is sexual or it is just something that feeds her thirst for tender love and attention missed by the fact that she did not get it from her mother. However, the change of the way the teacher reacts afterwards toward Firdaus is an indication of sexual attraction from the teacher’s side. The physical contact of holding hands could be done as showing motherly love but the action of ignoring Firdaus for the rest of the school year shows that the teacher sees that Firdaus is attracted to her and she avoids her as she could avoid a man that she cannot have. El Saadawi problematizes the fixity of sexual identity and so does Coelho. However, with Coelho, the character is less confused and has knowledge about same sex attraction. Maria has a name for the relationship between women while Firdaus does not even give the name gay, lesbian or homosexual desire to her attraction to Iqbal. As I mentioned earlier, working in the sex industry helps Firdaus to understand her needs and what she lacks in her relationship with her husband. Something she could not feel with her husband she feels with her client Fawzy.

The openness to homosexuality in the West is more than it is in Egypt especially taking into account the time the novels were written and published. It could be a suggestion El Saadawi makes about perversion happening to Firdaus caused by the community. We see Firdaus runs from men. She is surrounded by abusive men. In his book *Shakespeare and Literary Theory* on the desire and identity, Harris discusses queer theory and mentions the French philosopher, Foucault who unlike Freud “insisted sexuality does not precede but rather is entirely generated by the social” (Harris 124). This can be interpreted to mean that
Firdaus’ sexuality transforms because of the way she is treated by men in her community or maybe because of the awakening to her real identity. Unlike Maria, Firdaus is in a girls’ boarding school where she experiences emotional attachment to her teacher. It could be that she hates men to the point that she tries to find love with a woman. She unknowingly becomes a lesbian but this presents itself in the form of a confused sexual orientation until Iqbal comes and arouses that desire. The fact that Firdaus reasons with her friends and asks if a woman can love another woman brings out the confusion that she has with her feelings and sexual identity. It could be a normal situation that every young adult go through. However, El Saadawi is criticizing her community that separates men from women which results in less knowledge about the opposite sex. Firdaus gets to know about men through working in prostitution.

The difference in the reaction to the sexual feelings that these two characters have is a result of their social settings. Harris asserts that in the 19th century homosexuality was treated pathologically (Harris 125). It is not discussed much in Eleven Minutes. However, it is clear that Maria has more understanding of homosexuality since she does not worry much about her sexual orientation in the sense that she keeps working as a sex worker until she falls in love with Ralph. On the other hand, Firdaus’ confusion of her love to Iqbal is a pathological identity state generated by emotional need for love and attention or stems from the fact that she is affected by rape and molestation. In Maria’s case, the identity loss is different. She is not confused about her love to men but she is now getting her role. She is mostly with male sex partners. We see her writing in her diary “when I had nothing to lose, I had everything. When I stopped being who I am, I found myself.” (Coelho, 189). Maria has different kinds of sex and yet she is unable to enjoy the sex or sometimes enjoys it even though she cries afterwards or expresses her contempt of the sex act such as in the sadistic sex she has with the manager. Here we sense that the identity she is raised to have clashes
with the identity she explores. She is treated as a slave and yet she enjoys it. In fact, the decision that Maria makes at the beginning to save money enough for her family and then stop working in the business at the right time is a consequence of her feeling that she is afraid of losing her identity. Maria tries to understand her body through experience and reading. She ends her work in the sex industry without yet getting pleasure from penetration, which seems to be a problem for her. The conversation between Maria and the librarian about Freud’s ideas of infantilism shows that she recognizes that she still lives in that stage where she could not move her pleasure from the clitoris to the vagina. This indicates that she does not know her body due to bad education. The fact that she discusses Freud’s ideas and then panic is an indication of poor knowledge about her body. We do not see Maria asking women at the Copacabana about their sex lives. She investigates her body through experience with men. Maria is like Firdaus in that sense because she gets her knowledge in a late age being 23 and only then starts to investigate her body to understand her sexuality.

The focus of the analysis of these two books lies on how the writers’ arguments support the thesis that prostitution is a form of freedom for the woman. Coelho and El Saadawi depict working in prostitution as liberating for women. The major argument that brings these two books together is the independence that the characters attain through prostitution. Besides emotional and sexual freedom, the two characters also obtain financial freedom. However, the independence sought is more of an emotional and sexual kind. Both characters are exploited at an early stage in life, both sexually and financially. It is the sexual frustration the two characters experience which makes them change their views of men, love and life. The abstract idea of love becomes vague to them. Firdaus and Maria lose the ability to enjoy sex. Although to Maria, the early experience with a boy is merely a failed kiss at the age of 15 which is a traumatic one because it makes her feel rejected for not knowing how to kiss. This leads her to masturbation. “(Coelho, 11). Firdaus, on the other hand, has her trauma
later. She experiences sexual pleasure with Mohammadain in the scene they are playing bride and groom. Firdaus and Maria are both denied the liberty to enjoy sexual pleasure. For instance, when Maria’s father sees her masturbating, she is severely punished. On the other hand, Firdaus is circumcised by her mother when she approaches puberty (El Saadawi 16). This seems like a punishment to a young girl for going through the normal stage of growth.

To some women, prostitution is a means for understanding their body and sexuality. We do not see Maria asking women at the Copacabana about their sex lives. She is investigating her body through experience with men. Just like Firdaus, she is getting her knowledge in a late age being 23 and only then starts to investigate her body to understand her sexuality. Both characters did not get proper education about the female body. It could be possible that Maria tries to follow normative sexuality because of the pressure from her community. Paulo Coelho could be representing the idea that perversity precedes the social that Harris explained (Harris 124). Maria hears the librarian talking about Freud and his followers “If a woman’s sexual pleasure remained concentrated in the clitoris, this was a sign of infantilism or, worse, bisexuality” (Coelho, 221). Firdaus and Maria are denied the right to make decisions about how they would explore sex. The former can not deny anyone her body until she starts to work as a prostitute. Only then, she starts to change her view of her body because she feels wanted and priced. However, she lacks proper knowledge of her body. When she expresses pleasure, she explains the feeling metaphorically not knowing from where it comes. It is only a few times that she feels pleasure therefore she can not describe the feeling of pleasure. Maria also explores her body trying to understand it. Her struggle to find pleasure in penetration is an indication that she is not accepting her body.

According to Dollimore, perversity comes from internal contradictions (Harris 125). In Firdaus’ case, it is obvious that El Saadawi is drawing on the community that creates those kinds of contradictions. El Saadwai’s narrative system is different from that of Coelho. We
see Firdaus talking about herself throughout the novel but there is no clarification regarding how she thinks of the incidents in her life and what they create in her. She does not categorize the relationship between her and her uncle as a violation to her body. We even see that she misses the relationship. I am aware that El Saadawi tries in the novel to show that Firdaus is a child at that time and does not see that she is violated. However, the narrative is given by an adult, yet the language does not show that she criminalizes her uncle. Thus, this is contradictory. Firdaus does criminalize the other men who violate her body but not her uncle. That must create a kind of perversity in her. It could be said that El Saadawi indicates Firdaus’ need for a father in her life. Her relationship with her father is cold. Therefore, she directs her oedipal relationship toward her uncle who gives her attention. It is sensed that she is jealous of his wife who takes him away from her. That is represented when she hears them having sex while she is alone in bed. The arousal she gets is an indication of her perversity and that she is attracted to her uncle. Fidaus does not state in words that her uncle is sexually attractive to her but her failure of enjoying sex with men is an indication of the impression she has of her relationship with her uncle. I think El Saadawi is hinting that the child molestation Firdaus went through by her uncle ruins her ability to be a normal person developing sexual pleasure with stranger men. She does not even talk much of Mohammadain because he is inexperienced being a child when he plays the sexual game with her. Her uncle represents the older man who knows how to treat a woman and gets her aroused. However, as I mentioned before, the sex industry helped Firdaus get rid of that attachment to her uncle as her early experience with sexuality.

El Saadawi is criticizing a community that does not allow women to celebrate their sexuality. Firdaus is not protected by her mother from her uncle but when she starts to try exploring her sexuality she is punished by circumcision; something that can end in mutilation or the loss of sex drive. How can a community expect a woman to perform a certain role in
bed while they are denying them pleasure? Firdaus is annoyed by the fact that the men whom she serves keep asking her whether she is enjoying the sex (El Saadawi 77). If Firdaus is going through perversity according to the community then it is because of the contradictions that the community and family create in her. Her case is contrary to Maria’s experience during her stay in Europe. She suffers from lack of pleasure but she is not exposing perverse behavior because she is not violated like Firdaus. Moreover, Paulo Coelho hints that in the West there is overreaction to the limits men should show interest in a woman. It seems that Paulo Coelho, unlike El Saadawi, is criticizing civilization. I find that a recurring theme in his writings. It seems that Coelho is fascinated by old civilizations. He shows how much civilizations had been more open to sexuality especially pagan civilizations. At some points, Maria feels unwanted and rejected. Men are afraid of being accused of sexually harassing women. As a result, they are hesitant to show desire, and this leads to weak relationships between men and women. It seems to me that Coelho refers Maria's lost belief in the existence of love to the difficulty of maintaining a relationship resolving to the sex work as a mere job that does not indicate love. She is not being attached to her clients. In that way, she is not going to expect or await anything. Sex to her is just pleasure and moneymaking. Firdaus gains economic independence when she becomes a prostitute more than Maria does. Maria reflects on the fact that it is only twice that she gets a high price for her body. The Arab who paid her 1000 francs probably gives her that high price because it is rare to find a sex worker in his country. At the Copacabana, there are several women who work in prostitution even some of them are married women trying to support their husbands and families. That changes the prices of the bodies of women. 300 francs paid to the prostitute, 50 of it goes to the pimp. With Firdaus the price is decided by the prostitute. Legalizing the profession in Europe made the price fixed. In addition, since it is illegal in Egypt renders the women rare and thus more expensive. Sharifa confronts Fawzy for stealing her sex workers away from
her. That renders Firdaus rare and precious unlike Maria who has to compete with other girls. However, it is safer for Maria than to Firdaus who is not protected by the government. In the sex industry, both of the characters are celebrating their sexuality. Maria does not go through the pressure of satisfying her customer. She is freer to deny giving in to the customer. The same with Firdaus if she does not like person she would refuse giving her services; something that she could not do to her husband.

Hamilton in her paper mentions feminists who "opposed censorship and wanted to celebrate the diversities of women’s desires, fantasies and sexual identities, without denying the realities of male violence against women” (Hamilton 88). El Saadawi briefly touches on that issue of women’s desires and sexual identities. The only time we see Firdaus enjoying her sexuality is with Mohammadin and her uncle. Soon after this, her mom immediately organizes for her circumcision, taking away some part of her identity. With failure, we see Firdaus tries to enjoy sexual fantasy when her uncle’s hand reaches her thighs while she is busy making bread. Maria enjoys masturbation more than sex with a man. Firdaus’s feeling aroused when her uncle starts to have sex with his wife indicates perversion. The lack of romance in the early relationship is a cause of pain for Maria and the way to get rid of that pain is through masturbation. However, her resort to prostitution is partly because of her need for money but even when she has a sadistic sex and enjoys it, it is still masturbation given to her by another person. However, her experience is better than Firdaus’ because we know that she finds a person and falls in love again. On the other hand, Firdaus becomes a voyeur in a sense. She eavesdrops on the conversation between her uncle and his wife arranging plans to make her marry Mahmoud. In that scene, Firdaus gets sexual arousal when she hears about the arrangement of her marriage of Shaikh Mahmoud. First she hears them talking about her marriage and then hears them having a fore-play followed by sex. This is the time where imagination and fantasy succeeds to give Firdaus pleasure “my breathing grew rapid, so that
after a while I also started to pant with same strange frenzy.” (El Saadawi 51). Firdaus is not in a position to see the two make love. However, not seeing them enhanced her ability to imagine what would please her sexually. She has sexual arousal by imaging the sexual act. Paulo Coelho in *Eleven Minutes* states that “desire is not what you see, but what you imagine” (Coelho, 159). El Saadawi and Coelho focus on exposing the injustices practiced against women. Coelho in *Eleven Minutes* exhibits in different scenes the fantasies and desires of women. Likewise, El Saadawi too brings out the fascination women have of desires and fantasy. However, the latter blames the patriarchal society for the women perversion. The society also makes sexual experiences dangerous by eliminating the ability of women to celebrate their sexuality.

I think Nawal El Saadawi is an anarchist in her novel. The refusal of Firdaus to ask for forgiveness from the president of Egypt (who is always a male) is a declaration that she thinks killing the pimp is not a mistake. Also, by making all of the male characters villains is a cry against all the institutions of the country that are run by men. There is no way for women to take their rights if they do not demolish the entire patriarchal institutions to gain power over them and then their rights. There is no mention or any monologue by Firdaus wishing to have children in the novel. It seems that El Saadawi is eliminating any essentialist point of view. We don't even see any worries expressed by Firdaus regarding bearing children since it is a possibility given the fact she is raped and works in the sex industry. As Zucker claims, El Saadawi gives masculine traits to Firdaus to be head to head with the patriarchal society (Zucker 238). We see a glimpse of motherhood in the novel but it is not further stressed. It is when Firdaus flees her uncle’s house and feels sorry saying good-bye to her little cousin Hala; “she used to call me Daus. She was the only one of the children who smiled at me… I would stroke her hair and answer yes Hala… my feet ran the stairs, but her voice continued to echo in my ears until I reached the bottom, and walked out into the street.
As I advanced over the pavement I could still hear it coming from somewhere behind me” (El Saadawi 53). This kind of love could be a motherly one but it appears to me that her sympathy for her cousin is because she is also a female living in the same patriarchal society. Her cousin lives in the house that she is raped in. Firdaus chooses to be a mother to all women in her country by trying to change the status of women by crying against the community and narrating her story to the female psychiatrist. Firdaus knows that a child that she would have with a man can be the reason she is more enslaved by a man. Thus, she is instead mothering all women in her society.

In many scenes throughout the novel, Firdaus keeps seeing eyes that represent the patriarchal government that could be watching her because she is dangerous. Those eyes that hypnotize her by the blackness growing bigger and blacker and the white whiter and bigger. It could be the representation of the watching government that makes her hallucinate from fear of being watched all the time, and cannot fight back. While Firdaus describes people as not seeing “I was amazed by the huge number of people filling up the streets everywhere, but even more amazed to see the way they moved around like blind creatures that could neither see themselves, nor anyone else. My amazement became even greater when I realized that I had become one of them” (El Saadawi 54). This is an important statement of Firdaus’ fight against the patriarchal government and society. It is necessary for Firdaus to fight first by denying her body to men without a price, her refusal to give birth giving her life for a cause and then giving her testimony concerning killing the pimp and working in the sex industry. The community does not approve those things. However, Firdaus instead of asking for forgiveness she decides to make a statement against the patriarchal society and government.

Women sometimes use prostitution as a way of expressing their freedom from men. Women in the first, second and third wave of feminism have to fight for their right to enjoy their sexuality. Men control every aspect of life including when to have sex with women
without caring about their opinion. Prostitution helps women attain emotional, financial and sexual freedom. Coelho and El Sadaawi talk about two women from different times in history and different social backgrounds. Maria, the character in Coelho’s story is a Brazilian woman who leaves for Europe to pursue money and fame. She has a lot of freedom to experience with her body. Maria seems to enjoy learning about her body having sex with multiple men which she considers a source of power for her. She makes money and becomes financially independent. She also experiments with her sexuality after reading a lot of materials that increase her self-awareness. Firdaus, on the other hand, goes through a very painful childhood that denies her the freedom to enjoy her sexuality. She experiences sexual desires from a tender age. Despite her mother arranging for her to be circumcised, her sexual appetite does not subside. The young girl is more than ready to entertain sexual advances from her uncle. Firdaus’ desire to continue to explore and to break off the chains of men leads her to prostitution. She feels free to work under a female pimp because of the freedom to make decisions on her sexuality. This leaves her in a collision path with the male pimp because of his attempt to control her. El Sadaawi also introduces the concept of homosexuality when she talks about the attraction that the character has towards her teacher. The stories from these two characters bring out the struggle of women in these societies to come off the shadows of men. Sex is one of the most important gifts given by the creator to men and women. If women are not allowed to be in charge of anything else in the society, they should at least be left to decide on their sexuality. The attempt by men to take this right away from women is what leads many to prostitution.

Some critics do not discuss the issue of working in the sex industry because many feminists would consider it to be against the ideas of feminism. However, it is very important to discuss it because nowadays with the government regulating the industry many feminists would see it as a choice that works for some individuals. When Roxane Gay, the writer of *The
Bad Feminist, gave a lecture at Ball State University, one of the young attendants asked her of her opinion about women working in pornography. She said it is the only place where women have better payment than men. I think several critics could have discussed the issue, but instead they discuss the sexual violations women go through because they do not want to be torn between feminists who are having bad views of the industry. It is obvious that El Saadawi sees the industry to be empowering for Fridaus. Coelho is even clearer on his opinion of the industry because he states his ideas clearly about those civilizations that respected women who give sexual favors. I wish more studies would be given to Eleven Minutes. There were no articles on the book and it needs to be analyzed more because it is obvious that Paulo Coelho made a research about prostitution before writing his book, not to mention that he bases his book on a real a character just like El Saadawi.

To sum up, despite the differences between Firdaus and Maria, their portrayal and developments aim to promote their authors' feminist views. Both Firdaus and Maria are female protagonists who display prostitution as an empowering profession. While Maria and Firdaus are both displaced, their circumstances and cultural backgrounds are similar to some extent. Maria travels to Geneva in order to work as a dancer but ends up working in prostitution. Firdaus on the other hand, is displaced moving from her village to live in the city with her uncle and ends up meeting Sharifa and working for her as a prostitute. However, unlike Maria, her experiences with a male dominated society leave her traumatized. Moreover, both Maria and Firdaus are financially empowered by their profession. Also, working in the sex industry helps Firdaus and Maria become emotionally independent. Thus, throughout both novels, prostitution empowers Firdaus and Maria on many levels and helps them achieve independence.
Bibliography


