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From Victims to Agents: Reclaiming Female Autonomy

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Modern Languages in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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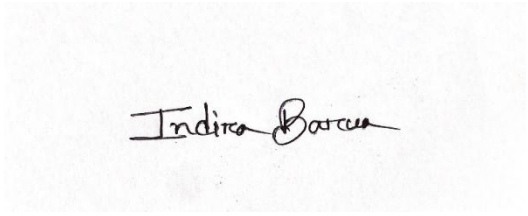
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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my original work while completing my degree at Independent University, Bangladesh.
2. The thesis does not contain materials previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately acknowledged and cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material that has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

Student's Full Name and Signature



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Approval

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Abstract

Feminine readings of *Woman at Point Zero, A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and *The Color Purple* still assemble curiosity and interest among scholars all around the world. This comparative study aims to delve into yet another critical analysis of all novels from the perspective of protagonists who suffered from the patriarchal system. Using theoretical frameworks of Beauvoir's "Othering" and Gilbert and Gubar's "Angel-killing" the study shows how this male- dominated structure uses verbal abuse, commodification, and domestic torment to enforce female immanence. The analysis of the novels, their protagonists, and the dynamics and ideologies of feminism present in the novels is conducted using a qualitative research methodology. Through the close reading of the novels, connecting them with theoretical frameworks, and an in-depth literature review, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the feminist perspectives.

Keywords: Patriarchal shackles; Respectability; Worthlessness; Submissiveness; Fragility.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated my beloved parents, husband, and mother-in-law whose endless love, support, sacrifices and belief in my potential have been the primary impetus behind my achievements. I am immensely grateful to my professors and instructors. Their knowledge, guidance, and motivation have been the noteworthy not just in the development of this thesis but also my progress as a student and an individual. This success would not have been possible without everyone who stood by me. Thank you.

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Glossary

Autonomy:	The ability of a person to govern themselves, make decisions freely, and exist independently from oppressive control or influence.
Internalized Oppression:	When individuals accept and believe the negative stereotypes and limitations imposed on them by a dominant group.
Intersectionality:	A framework that examines how different forms of oppression (such as gender, class, race) overlap and interact.
Othering:	A process through which individuals or groups are marginalized and treated as fundamentally different, inferior, or outside the norm.
Objectification:	The treatment of a person, especially women, as an object or commodity devoid of autonomy, individuality, or dignity.
Resistance:	Actions or strategies used to challenge, oppose, or subvert oppressive systems and structures.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The persistent structures of patriarchy across diverse geographical and cultural landscapes have historically marginalized women, often silencing their narratives and curtailing their agency. In literature, these struggles are poignantly captured through the lives of protagonists who endure systemic oppression yet manage to forge paths toward self-actualization. This research examines the transformative journeys of Firdaus in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1977), Mariam in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), and Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982). Each of these women begins her narrative as a victim of deeply entrenched patriarchal violence—ranging from domestic abuse and forced marriage to sexual exploitation. However, eventually she emerges as an agent of her own liberation.

A deeper justification for selecting these texts together lies not only in their geographical diversity, but also resides in their shared exploration of the gradual awakening of female subjectivity within oppressive patriarchal systems. Firdaus, Mariam, and Celie represent three distinct yet interconnected models of resistance. It collectively illuminates how patriarchy operates across different socio-cultural, religious, and economic contexts while maintaining similar structures of domination. These narratives not merely bind together oppression but the nuanced processes through which each protagonist negotiates, resists, and redefines her position within the system. This study, therefore, adopts a comparative framework based on several key criteria that enable a more structured and critical analysis of their transformative journeys. One such criterion is a narrative voice, which significantly shapes the reader's engagement with each

character's experience of marginalization and empowerment. Firdaus's first-person narration presents an unfiltered, assertive voice that directly confronts patriarchal authority, transforming her story into a powerful act of testimony. In contrast, Celie's epistolary narrative reflects an evolving consciousness, where her letters gradually shift from expressions of submission and silence to assertions of identity and independence. Mariam's story, however, is mediated through a third person narrative, which initially underscores her silence but gradually reveals her inner strength and moral agency. By comparing these narrative modes, the study highlights how voice itself becomes a crucial site of resistance. The study also examines the forms of resistance employed by each character, recognizing that resistance is not a singular or uniform act, but a spectrum of responses shaped by individual circumstances. Firdaus's resistance is radical and confrontational, culminating in an act that symbolically dismantles the authority imposed upon her. Mariam's resistance, in contrast, is sacrificial and rooted in compassion, demonstrating how acts of care and protection can challenge patriarchal control in profound ways. Celie's resistance is transformative and reconstructive, as she reclaims her identity through economic independence, creative expression, and the redefinition of personal relationships. This diversity in resistance strategies underscores that empowerment is multifaceted and cannot be confined to a single model. The study considers the material and socio-economic conditions that shape each woman's capacity for autonomy. Economic dependence emerges as a significant factor in sustaining patriarchal control, while access to resources becomes a key element in achieving independence. Celie's eventual economic self-sufficiency marks an alternative shift in her position within society, whereas Firdaus's engagement with prostitution complicates traditional notions of empowerment by presenting it as both a site of exploitation and a means of control over her own

body and choices. Mariam's lack of economic agency further highlights the structural limitations imposed upon her.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

These specific texts were chosen over other novels because they provide interconnected frameworks for illustrating how male- dominated structures maintain similar systems to oppress women. Despite the cultural differences between twentieth -century Egypt, war- torn Afghanistan, and the rural American South, the female experience under patriarchy shares a common thread of dehumanization and othering. In these contexts, women are often viewed as property or objects. The central problem is understanding the mechanisms through which marginalized women, initially characterized by silence and obedience, break through rigid social and psychological barriers to claim autonomy. This study addresses the lack of comparative analysis regarding the shared psychological and physical strategies employed by these protagonists to redefine selfhood.

1.2 Research Question and Hypothesis

This study asks: How do Firdaus, Mariam, and Celie transform from victims of patriarchy into agents of their own liberation? The working hypothesis is that Firdaus, Mariam, and Celie transform from silent victims into empowered individuals through the development of self – awareness, the cultivation of emotional support systems (solidarity), and strategic acts of rebellion. This transformation suggests that liberation begins with reclaiming one's voice and redefining selfhood beyond patriarchal boundaries.

1.3 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach to how Firdaus, Mariam, and Celie transform from victims of patriarchal oppression into agents of liberation. Primary materials include close textual analysis of El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, Hosseini's A *Thousand Splendid Suns*, and Walker's *The Color Purple* focusing on narrative representations of psychological shifts, internal monologues, and subversive actions. Secondary scholarship, e.g. Tugume (2021); Raajitha (2017); Altaf (2022); Çevik and Töngür (2019) will provide cultural context and feminist critique. A comparative thematic analysis will track each character's progression from silence and othering to self- awareness and rebellion. Most of the data has been collected through internet and IUB e-library. The data gathered from these scholarly sources work as a part of the study in order to support the study discussions.

1.4 Outcome and Limitations

This study anticipates demonstrating that liberation is not only the absence of physical constraint but also a profound psychological shift. It will show how Firdaus finds dignity in refusing to live under a corrupt system, how Mariam claims agency through sacrifice for Laila, and how Celie discovers self-worth through creative expression and community.

Limitations include the focus on fictional protagonists; although the characters reflect real social conditions, their resistance is shaped by authorial choices and may not capture the full complexity of women lived experiences. There is a linguistic and cultural limitation: this analysis relies on English translations of El Saadawi's and Hosseini's works. As a result, some nuances, metaphors of resistance, and idioms from Arabic or Dari/Pashto may be reduced or altered in translation. However, this study does not consider how colonial histories in Egypt and Afghanistan have shaped the specific patriarchies the characters are fighting against.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The chapter summarizes the existing scholarship related to comparative study. It reviews the criticism around the topic and studies conducted on transformation from victims of patriarchy into agents of their own liberation.

2.1 Development of Self-Awareness

Self-awareness serves as the foundational step in each protagonist's shift from victimhood to agency, enabling them to recognize and reject internalized oppression. In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus begins as a product of relentless patriarchal control, enduring childhood abuse, forced marriage, and exploitation. Her awakening occurs through a growing consciousness of systemic male domination. As Zahro et al. argue that Firdaus displays women's power through the "decision to use her body as a means to gain autonomy is an act of reclaiming power in a society that seeks to control her" (809). Firdaus's choice of being a prostitute challenges the conventional domestic structures that commodified her. It has transformed her body from an object of passive male gratification into a tool for financial and psychological independence. This "reclaiming power" implies that, in a society where women agency is suppressed, the only way to achieve autonomy is through self-discovery. Furthermore, Firdaus's use of her body to gain control demonstrates that the society fails to provide freedom to women except through their appearance or sexuality. Zahro et al. claim that her choice is a powerful uprising against an ideology that seeks to silence her. Benon Tugume argues that in *Woman at Point Zero*, the patriarchal system creates a "male-female gender dichotomy" where men are inherently cast as masters and women

as subordinates or objects of exchange (118). This binary structure is sustained through interlocking mechanisms of class oppression, male hegemony, and religious deception, which collectively reduce women to commodities within male-dominated social, economic, and familial relations. Firdaus's narrative insight—casting men as "criminals" and women as "prostitutes"—serves as a radical critique of this dichotomy. It exposes how patriarchy not only subordinates women but also criminalizes their resistance to maintain male mastery and female objectification. “She discovers that she is vulnerable in a society where everyone exploits her because she is a woman” (Fwangyil 24) this awareness crystallizes through repeated experiences where men—family members, husbands, lovers, employers, and pimps-treat her body and labor as commodities, reinforcing that her femaleness inherently marks her as exploitable and subordinate, with no path to true autonomy or respect outside male control. Ultimately, this insight fuels Firdaus's radical critique that all women are reduced to forms of prostitution under patriarchy, driving her to reject submission entirely, even at the cost of her life, as she refuses to live in a world that perpetually victimizes her due to her gender. This realization is a turning point as it erases her misunderstandings about safety and conventional morality. She considers that protection from male is a form of control or hidden abuse. This understanding leads her to find ways to defend herself in the world that provides no freedom and safety.

Similarly, building on these individual trajectories of transformation, the comparative analysis reveals important parallels. Both Mariam and Celie navigate distinct yet interconnected paths, moving from silence and subjugation toward self-awareness and empowerment. Akhtar et al. describe Mariam’s journey in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as one of "endurance, struggles and resistance" against an illegitimate social status, evolving from submissiveness to a recognition of her intrinsic worth (113). Her self-awareness deepens through years of abuse, transforming

resentment into understanding of shared female pain and personal value. This internal shift marks her progression from passive suffering to empowered identity. This transformation also highlights that even the most oppressed people can find the strength to reclaim their autonomy. She rejects of being nothing and admires herself as a person of substance. Celie in *The Color Purple* epitomizes initial silence, writing fragmented letters to God about rape, forced marriage, and abuse. Raajitha emphasizes Celie's submissive nature and fear of men, noting that her path to self-realization involves education and economic independence. Lewis examines how Celie's intersecting gender and race identities cause trauma, yet her growing self-awareness—through questioning stereotypes—allows her to reclaim her body and spirit. Celie's narrative voice evolves from pain to articulate self-affirmation, illustrating psychological transformation.

2.2 Cultivation of Emotional Support Systems (Solidarity)

Solidarity among women emerges as a crucial mechanism for empowerment, providing emotional validation and collective strength against isolation. Firdaus's journey in *Woman at Point Zero* is largely solitary, yet fleeting encounters with women expose patriarchal hypocrisy and reinforce her resolve. While direct sisterhood is limited, her narrative itself becomes a form of solidarity, as Saadawi frames Firdaus as a martyr whose story inspires resistance.

In contrast, Mariam and Laila's relationship in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* exemplifies transformative solidarity. Initially rivals under Rasheed's control, they forge a bond that heals mutual wounds and fosters resistance. Çevik and Töngür highlight "Laila and Mariam get united against patriarchal Taliban tyranny so much that this unity pulls both out of the isolation that gives them the power to make up for their limitations, agony and victimization inflicted by the social conditions" (62) -their shared suffering under Rasheed's violence and the Taliban's

oppressive laws draws them together. What begins as rivalry or resentment evolves into alliance, friendship, and mutual support while Altaf describes how Hosseini portrays women fighting to claim space despite subjugation. Their sisterhood empowers both: Laila softens Mariam's bitterness, and Mariam finds purpose in protecting Laila and her children. This alliance counters patriarchal division, enabling shared survival and hope. Their unity also asserts that when women bend together, they can do anything to save each other even in the midst of a war zone. This alliance acts as a quiet but deliberate resistance against patriarchal system that considers them as disposable commodity.

Furthermore, Celie's journey illustrates how empowerment is not achieved in isolation but is profoundly shaped through the strength of female solidarity and collective support. Her empowerment in *The Color Purple* hinges on sisterhood with Sofia, Shug Avery, and others. Shug's love awakens Celie's sexuality and self-esteem, while Sofia's defiance models resistance. Raajitha notes the role of emotional and economic support in Celie's independence, underscoring how female bonds dismantle isolation and foster communal strength: "Shug has not only been a supportive friend but also like a mother figure guiding women in their lives. The novel portrays all the female characters having a bond together and helping one another" (115). Beyond emotional comfort, this connection provides practical and economic empowerment, as seen by Shug's encouragement of Celie to establish her own pants-making business. This move from isolation to community support demonstrates that patriarchal control is based on keeping women separate and competitive. When the women in the story decide to support one another, they break the cycle of relying on male dominated system and form a new social structure centered on caring. Their united power serves as a type of resistance, demonstrating that independence is rarely gained in isolation, but rather using the encouragement of others. By sharing their resources

and expertise, these people break down the barriers of silence that had previously dictated their existence. Shug's influence, in particular, helps Celie discover her voice by showing her that her body and spirit are solely her own. This network of female solidarity gradually spreads to other characters, such as Sofia and Nettie, causing a ripple effect of liberty across the town. Finally, Raajitha's study indicates that when women band together, they not only endure their trials, but also lay the groundwork for long-term independence and joy.

2.3 Strategic Acts of Rebellion

The culmination of empowerment manifests in deliberate, often radical, acts of rebellion that affirm agency. Firdaus's ultimate rebellion—murdering her pimp—symbolizes rejection of commodification. Zahro et al. show her "radical decision-making" and "rejection" as assertions of power, refusing submission even at the cost of execution (810). Firdaus's ultimate act of killing her pimp is a deliberate, extreme choice. She chooses death on her own terms rather than a life of continued subjugation.

Likewise, through feminist perspective, one can judge Mariam's murder of Rasheed as an act. In this act, she digs herself out of the gender oppression that troubles her throughout her life. And after killing Rasheed, we see a transformed Mariam, resolute and full of confidence. She stays to face the consequences fearlessly" (Akhtar et al. 117). The murder marks a profound internal shift. Previously timid, resigned, and numb to abuse, Mariam becomes decisive and empowered. In prison and at her trial, she shows no fear or regret—she accepts execution with calm acceptance, even smiling at the end. This transformation reflects feminist ideas of empowerment: breaking patriarchal chains can awaken inner strength, self-worth, and fearlessness.

Celie's rebellion is multifaceted: leaving her abusive husband, starting a business, and embracing her sexuality. Lewis connects "Celie, in particular, validates the power of support; her

transformation is contingent upon her strong, healing connections" (37). Celie starts as a voiceless, traumatized survivor of incest, rape, forced marriage, domestic abuse, racism, poverty, and religious alienation. Her arc proves that supportive connections are essential for reclaiming agency, while Raajitha stresses "She moves back to her home and begins to live independently as a pants maker" (117) economic independence as key to living autonomously.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in the theoretical lenses provided by Simone de Beauvoir, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar. Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* offers a lens for analyzing the othering of Firdaus, Mariam, and Celie. Her assertion that "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (330) helps to explain how patriarchal societies socialize these protagonists into immanence, where they are defined in relation to men. Her pivotal idea is that "woman" is not a biological or natural concept, but rather a societal entity defined by men. People commonly interchange the physical appearance of a male or female with the social identity of a man or woman. She argues that this distinction is fundamentally related to the concept of sex versus gender. Sex is an inherent fact, but gender is primarily a patriarchal construction imposes on women. Men have established themselves as a subject of society whose primary duty is to perform actions and construct. On the other hand, women as the "other" are portrayed by their role as a mother or wife (741). Therefore, a woman's identity is lost and substituted with the utilitarian function in a male-dominated system. Her second idea "becoming" underscores that societal pressure, expectations and punishments shape womanhood. Humans should have autonomy to control themselves and make decisions on their own. However, when society implements social boundaries, "become" becomes limited. If a woman's surroundings are defined by domestic torment, her opportunities for self-discovery are limited. Firdaus, Mariam, and Celie's marital subjugation highlights a widespread rejection of female agency in which women are treated like commodities in a patriarchal economy. In *Woman at Point Zero,* Firdaus regards herself as a gold miner rather than a human being since her uncle arranges her marriage as a profitable deal. Her identity is destroyed and replaced with the utilitarian function of a wife in her marriage. She is both a target for her

husband's domestic oppression and a vessel for his bodily demands. In Cairo, being a prostitute reflects that she is inessential in society, but men are the essential part of her life. Mariam's transformation in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* from a person to an object is sparked by her father's treachery. Her father arranges her marriage to a much older widower, bypassing her agency. She is treated as a biological tool in this patriarchal system, depriving her of the status of an independent person. Her worth is solely based on her ability to procreate. If she does not have a male successor to continue the patriarchal lineage, she loses her worth and becomes a target of physical abuse. This is consistent with Beauvoir's idea of the woman as "Other" characterized only by her status as a wife or mother to men. Celie's forced marriage in *The Color Purple* serves as another example of this erasure of choice. She is forced to take on the responsibilities of surrogate mother and domestic worker right away. As Beauvoir notes, “she is treated like a living doll” (342). All three women are subservient wives, even in the face of abuse and torture.

Gilbert and Gubar's idea offers an essential theoretical framework for comprehending these women’s transition from being silenced to reclaiming their voices. That we must “kill” the “angel in the house” (596) highlights that the angel character consists of purity, dispassion, and submissiveness, making women an ideal figure of patriarchal society. Conversely, the monster character is portrayed as enthusiastic, assertive, and uncontrollable. Figures such as Bertha Mason from *Jane Eyre*, an unnamed character from “The Yellow Wallpaper” are driven to madness due to patriarchal control. This madness is an illustration of the psychological reformation required to break patriarchal constraints. These women are called madwomen because they represent the “Angel of death” identity in order to become a subject (601). Firdaus accomplishes this by killing her pimp, fiercely rejecting her place in the patriarchal order, and consenting to her execution as a sovereign "subject" rather than a victim. Likewise, in *The Thousand Splendid Suns,* Mariam's

transformation from a submissive wife to a rebel culminates in her killing the husband. This act is done in order to defend her children and co- wife; she also faces her execution with a sense of liberated pride. Similarly, Celie in *The Color Purple* reclaims her voice by choosing her own route to Memphis, cursing her husband's domestic tyranny, and defying him. “What shall I do to gratify myself or to be admired” (600) is the question that each of these protagonists begins to prioritize. They have demonstrated the “Angel of death” by commencing to satisfy themselves (601). They kill the angel image within in order to gain control over their lives.

The link between Beauvoir's and Gilbert and Gubar’s concept assert that these protagonists do not just transition from victims to agents - they actively reclaim their narratives. Beauvoir exposes restrictive constraints imposed on women, while Gilbert and Gubar show how women break free from within. The “Angel in the House” becomes an internalized voice that pressures Mariam and Celie toward submission (596). Decisive acts-stabbing a pimp, wielding a shovel, or moving to Memphis - are deliberate manifestations of the change within, as the submissive aspect of their identities is eradicated.

This framework further allows for a comparative analysis of how softness is forcibly transformed into hollow, defensive fortitude as a prerequisite for freedom. For instance, the transition from being a living doll to a girl with a voice is not portrayed as a simple choice. Instead, it is a violent psychological renovation necessitated by a world that offers no safety. The lenses help to articulate that when Firdaus, Mariam, and Celie stop asking what will please their society, and instead prioritizing their own gratification, they are effectively declaring a war against society. They are rebelling against the patriarchal system that birthed them. Ultimately, these theories validate the protagonists' actions as legitimate conclusions to lives defined by

oppression. This process proves that autonomy is often a communal and spiritual process of reclaiming one's worth in a commodified world.

Chapter 4

Discussion

The chapter focuses on the main discussion points of the comparative study. The chapter is sub-sectioned to distinguish the thematic discussion and to ease the appraisal of the topics.

4.1 Women's Fragility in the Patriarchal Shackles

A woman is inherently as delicate and innocent as a flower. Her personality shifts if she is imprisoned by patriarchy and denied an environment of affection. This tenderness develops into a new kind of power. Firdaus, Mariam, and Celie are examples of such women. To achieve autonomy, they broke free from the shackles if their patriarchal cages.

4.1.1 Abuse of Words

These key figures are surrounded by many familiar faces, yet they have shown their cruelty and made them strangers to these women's needs. In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus's uncle's wife mentions that Firdaus has a nose "big and ugly like a tin mug," reflecting that, without being beautiful, a woman cannot choose her own husband (Saadawi 39). To choose her husband and obtain her parents' approval for marriage, she must be bequeathed assets by her parents and bewitch them. She was sold as a bribe to a person over sixty, making her uncle seem indifferent when she needed him the most. Here, marriage, as a patriarchal establishment, commodified her. After fleeing her husband's residence, she meets a man who offers her a temporary apartment while she looks for work. During a dispute, he insists on her silence and uses disparaging phrases

like "street walker" and "low woman"; this verbal mistreatment implies that, by providing her with an oasis of well-being, he believes he is entitled to the role of authoritative patron (49). However, his verbal abuse demonstrates that his support is strictly conditional; he effectively exchanges sanctuary for her silence and passivity. This dynamic implies that a displaced woman has no truly safe shelter within a system that sees her as a product. He uses criticizing phrases such as "street walker" and "low woman" to reinforce her social standing through moral humiliation. In this patriarchal structure, respectability is granted only to those who remain subservient in the household. Ironically, Firdaus was deemed respectable as a victim of domestic violence, but she loses that status when she pursues financial independence through sex work. As she was told, “you are not respectable” highlights that being respectable is a tool of controlling women (68). Mortification is a form of marginalizing women who exist beyond the boundaries of male ownership or domestic control. This situation closely reflects Beauvoir’s famous idea that “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” which contends that womanhood is shaped by society—by external pressures, expectations, and punishments (330). For Firdaus, becoming a woman means being pushed into roles men define. Labeled a prostitute from the start, her identity was set by male desire and social taboos, even before she had a say. Being called unrespectable triggers this change; it is how society makes her worth depend solely on what she offers men. Denied respectability, the patriarchal system leaves her excluded. Yet this outsider status allows her to see that all relationships between women and men are transactional, whether in marriage or elsewhere. In the end, enforcing respectability asserts power. When Firdaus refuses to be the obedient, respectable niece or wife, she is cast out, showing that society often imposes womanhood to enforce a strict hierarchy in which respect rewards obedience and disrepute punishes independence.

Likewise, in *The Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam clutches her father's hand toward a fresh start, her heart full of faith and hope, only to be thrown into an endless chasm. Her hopes for a life with her father are lost forever in that black emptiness. Nana, Mariam's mother, reveals her as "harami" from the beginning; this interprets a social attempt to strip her of her legal rights before she ever reaches the age of self-advocacy (Hosseini 1). The expression harami signifies Mariam's position as an illegitimate child born outside her parents' legally sanctioned wedlock. By using this label, her mother effectively shifts the burden of her own perceived wrongdoing to her daughter. This establishes an internalized patriarchal cage in Mariam's mentality, teaching her to accept a state of worthlessness. Her mother's tool is a defensive one: by educating Mariam to have no expectations from life, she wants to protect her from the anguish of future disappointments. Furthermore, the mother's assertion, "like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman" explains the systemic nature of gendered blaming (5). This metaphor implies that mankind has an innate ability to hold women accountable, regardless of who is actually responsible. This is denoted by Mariam's situation: while she endures societal judgment, her biological father is completely unaffected by his own treachery. This double standard manifests how, in a patriarchal system, women are expected to be culpable from birth. Rasheed's urge that she "to start behaving like a wife" limits her identity to a set of domestic functions: cooking, cleaning, and sexual availability (64). This indicates that marriage is not considered a partnership but a rigorous transaction in which the husband gives shade in exchange for the woman's complete submissiveness and labor. Following a terrible miscarriage, Mariam and Rasheed's relationship falls into a bitter emptiness. When Rasheed intends to marry a second wife, he ignores Mariam's refusal claiming, "it's not your decision. It's hers and mine" (209)-this deletion of Mariam's voice exposes that her feelings are inconsequential to his household

planning. Despite years of marriage, she is suddenly treated like a stranger in her own home, clarifying how fast a woman may be sidelined when she is no longer deemed useful. Beauvoir criticizes this dehumanization: “She is treated like a living doll” means that Mariam is seen not as a person but as an object—passive, decorative, and silent (342). Rasheed reduces Mariam from useful to unnecessary, expecting her, like a doll, to sit quietly while everything changes. He forbids her from voicing her opinion or showing emotion. He forces her to accept her fate, acting with the passivity of a toy, which cannot choose its direction or owner. The metaphor exposes the disturbing belief that society expects a woman to work and obey, but to stay silent when her wishes clash with a man. When Rasheed disregards her refusal, he demonstrates that marriage can silence a woman before anything else. He ignores her feelings, turning her into a background figure and setting her aside for someone newer or more desirable. The illusion of freedom granted to wives by society is just that—an illusion. Tradition, like a puppeteer, controls women and even forces them to watch their own replacement, powerless to protest.

Also, another noteworthy figure, Celie from *The Color Purple*, reveals how far a man's primal bodily desires push him to become vicious and predatory. At the age of fourteen, a girl named Celie is raped by her father, Pa, by quoting that “you gonna do what your mammy wouldn't” highlights that she is replacing her mother's duties (Walker 3). She is the child not to be protected; a commodity to be used. As the principal contributor, the father asserts complete control over his daughter's future. He wields this authority preemptively, directing her life's course before she has the developmental capacity to identify and communicate her own preferences. This dynamic implies that economic support is utilized as a justification for complete residence control. He is defining her as a replacement object for his own gratification. Marriage to an unfamiliar person is a common social practice, and Celie is forced to navigate it without

knowing her husband. This partnership is not a marital relationship, but rather a shift in domestic control. One of his children asks him why he beats Celie, and her husband's assertion is that "cause she's my wife. Plus, she stubborn" which underscores that marriage is seen merely as a transfer of ownership (19). In his capacity as both husband and provider, he affirms unambiguous power that includes the use of physical violence. By narrating Celie as stubborn, he implies that her refusal to submit is a valid justification for his aggression. This situation proves the point in *The Second Sex*: "she is treated like a living doll" which compares Celie directly to a doll—an object without agency (342). Celie must play the role her husband chooses for her. When she does not act as the quiet, obedient woman he demands, even small acts of resistance become stubbornness. He uses this to punish her. To him, Celie is property, not a person. If she asserts herself, he calls her broken. This comparison fits: in his eyes, Celie is decorative, disposable, and used by her owner. Dolls do not talk back or want things; they are passive. By beating her, her husband forces Celie into a powerless, doll-like state. Marriage and property rights erase Celie's identity and support a system that suppresses women. His violence is controlled, not just anger. He uses it to make the living doll obey. Celie is left only to react to his demands and punishments. Celie goes into a defensive state of psychological dissociation, imagining herself as a "tree", attempting to strip away her own humanity (19). In this metaphor, Celie is repositioning herself into an object that can withstand both physical and mental trauma without reacting. This establishes how the patriarchal cage uses both physical abuse and derogatory language to force a woman to abandon her vulnerability, compelling a transformation from fragility to a hollow, defensive fortitude.

4.2 The Renovation of the Subject

Firdaus, Mariam, and Celie's transition is not a solitary process; rather, it is propelled by the vigorous endowment of specific individuals who serve as catalysts for their emancipation. These heroic fellows are inspired to find a way out of the patriarchal cage by accomplices who provide significant moments of insight. In *Woman at Point Zero*, Sharifa is the prostitute who assists Firdaus in acknowledging that she can own her body-she has that right and she can fix her price by herself. Sharifa mentions that “you must be harder than life, Firdaus. Life is extremely hard. The only people who really live are those who are harder than life itself” Sharifa defends that in this society, a woman's softness is regarded as a vulnerability that invites exploitation (53). She encourages Firdaus to move beyond aimless endurance and instead build an impenetrable defense against the systemic attacks that seek to destroy her spirit. Firdaus realizes, “She opened my eyes to life, to events in my past, in my childhood, which had remained hidden to my mind” which boosts the idea that Sharifa is a form of intellectual pedagogy based on lived experience—knowledge that patriarchal figures like fathers, uncles, and husbands routinely withhold (54). By dismantling the myths of marital protection, she forces Firdaus to confront the reality that life is a battlefield rather than a fairytale. In a society that commodified the female body, Sharifa believes that the only way to reclaim agency is through radical self-valuation. This guidance teaches Firdaus how to prioritize her own needs, set boundaries with those who want to confine her, and successfully transition from an object of exchange to a self-determined subject. Sharifa conveys to Firdaus that men are not the final arbiters of a woman's value or honor; rather, the woman has the sole right to define her worth and assert her presence in society. She encourages Firdaus to take on the role of a formidable adversary rather than a disposable resource for the benefit of others. Firdaus learns from establishing strict boundaries that respect in a commodified world is

frequently contingent on the cost of access. Firdaus recognizes that traditional submissiveness lacks dignity and respect in a hostile patriarchal structure. She concludes that only by adopting a resolute, uncompromising persona will she be able to command the respect she has been denied and force the world to recognize her existence. This transition from softness to a hardened exterior represents her ultimate rejection of the passive victim's role in favor of a self-determined subject. After being deceived by Ibrahim, she acknowledges, "now I realized that the least deluded of all women was the prostitute. That marriage was the system built on the most cruel suffering for women" -Firdaus claims that by turning into a prostitute, she is no longer misled (82). She recognizes the world just like it is: a battleground for supremacy. She prefers a genuine struggle to the deceptive comfort of domestic confinement.

On the other hand, in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns,* Mariam initially harbors strong resentment for her co-wife, Laila, seeing her presence as a threat to their shared domestic space. This external conflict is mirrored by an internal shift: Mariam feels profoundly alienated from her own identity as she navigates her changing status within the household. Her hostility toward Laila reflects the emotional turmoil she faces in Rasheed's home. She asks Laila "I have no use for your company. Don't want it. What I want is to be alone" reflects that Mariam sees Laila as a rival rather than a companion- another tool Rasheed has brought in to replace her (219). Her rivalry is a reaction to patriarchy's systematic antagonism toward women. Throughout her life, her father has used her for his reputation, and her husband for domestic purposes. Even if Mariam accepts Laila's offer, she risks being exploited or in pain again. Rejection is the only way to relieve that pain and gain emotional autonomy. Later, they started sharing household chores and tea with each other, and the mention "Mariam slowly grew accustomed to this tentative but pleasant companionship" demonstrates that the house stopped being a complete isolation and became a

shared space (241). By becoming accustomed to Laila, Mariam transitions from existential erasure to relational significance. This companionship serves as the spark for her awakening, demonstrating that the restoration of autonomy is often a communal process forged over shared tea and silent understandings of the domestic realm. Mariam takes a transformative and unprecedented step by attempting a clandestine escape with Laila and Aziza in search of a life free of domestic abuse. In doing so, she consciously prefers the peril of the open road to the oppressive security of her home. However, their attempt at autonomy is foiled when they are apprehended by authorities and forcibly returned to Rasheed, reinforcing the cycle of patriarchal control.

Likewise, in *The Color Purple*, the arrival of Shug Avery should be interpreted as a sound and visual interruption to Celie's silent environment. If Celie's life before Shug was a monochrome of maltreatment, Shug is a burst of color that requires a complete re-evaluation of oneself. Shug speaks to Celie's life in a positive frame by acknowledging that “life don't stop just cause you leave home, Miss Celie” this suggests that if she walks away from her house, no one will be there waiting for her; alternatively, everything will proceed as usual (67). Her husband will get married without a second thought, as he has before. Shug solicits her to nurture dignity and subjectivity “If you was my wife, she say, I’d cover you up with kisses stead of licks, and work hard for you too” depicts how deeply she admires her as well as makes her feel like she holds a belief in love, respect, and freedom (90). She convinces her that a wife's responsibility is not only to care for the house and children, but also to love and be loved. Later on, Shug offers to help her in searching for Nettie's letters, which Celie's husband secretly kept isolating them. Celie hopes to kill her husband for separating her sister Nettie from herself; Shug states that “Nette be coming home before long. Don't make her have to look at you like us look at Sofia” she

emphasizes that she endeavors to redirect Celie's attention far from killing her husband and instead towards redeeming the bond that her husband wanted to break apart (115). She wants Celie to come to understand that justice can be achieved without killing an individual. Celie believes that God has made her life miserable, so she is afraid of Him. Shug contributes a significant part in helping Celie to recapture her spiritual autonomy “God love everything your love? and a mess of stuff you don't. But more than anything else, God love admiration “depicts that the patriarchal order conditioned Celie to have no ambitions; however, Shug points out that God admires whatever wishes she has in her subconscious (159). She is autonomous enough to indulge her own desires without regard for whether masculine authority conforms or not. Shug reshaped God into a Creator from a judge in Celie's subconscious. Celie admits that “now that my eyes opening. I feels like a fool. Next to any little scrub of a bush in my yard, Mr. ____'s evil sort of shrink” exhibits that her husband is a very tiny living thing to be afraid of. His authority was solely an illusion built around her fear (159). If the dread is gone, she will no longer fear him. So, Firdaus, Mariam, and Celie each possess a particular person in their lives who has widened their perspectives and strengthened them enough to ask for their freedom.

4.3 From Nothing to Everything

Following self-realization, they took key actions to convince themselves that they are nothing but merely the entirety. They solidify their status as the most notable figures by prioritizing their freedom from patriarchal norms. Firdaus feels unaffected by everything and quotes “I hope for nothing. I want for nothing. I fear nothing. I am free” addresses that she has conquered all the misery and sorrows of her life and that she has nothing to hope for and does not anymore fear masculinity or maltreatment (83). She is entitled to her thoughts and consciousness; she is no

longer a vessel to be entrapped, praised for her submissive nature, and beaten for her unwavering determination. In a culture that values patriarchy, there is always an unjust binary: men are the masters, and women are their slaves. They cannot have their goals, ambitions, or opinions. If they are assaulted, they must accept destiny. They cannot resist their masters but Firdaus notes, "in that case I want to be one of the Masters and not one of the slaves" hinges on how she no longer adheres to societal norms that oblige women to be slaves (90). She speaks out strongly in opposition to it. Firdaus has been frightened her entire life. She assumed that dread was an inherent part of her femininity. She realizes the man is as mortal and terrified as she is. This is the point at which she becomes the predator, and he becomes the prey. She claims the wife is a slave who is unaware of her status. A successful prostitute is a master considering that she perceives and takes charge of the transaction. Gilbert and Gubar say a woman writer—or any woman seeking autonomy—must "kill" the "angel in the house"; this angel is the internalized ideal of a submissive, selfless woman, which society uses to control people like Firdaus (596). Her oppressors forced her into obedience through abuse. In doing so, they destroyed the very quality they wanted to exploit. As a result, by breaking her habit of obedience, Firdaus frees herself from society's expectations. She sees the angel as a tool for her own imprisonment; therefore, by rejecting the image of the perfect woman, Firdaus refuses to be a slave to others' demands. Her journey is about taking control and resisting objectification. This rejection marks her shift from victim to someone who shapes her future. To exist in a patriarchal world, a woman must reject ideals demanding her silence and submission. By doing so, Firdaus exposes how fragile the system is; once the internal slave is gone, the external master loses power. At one point, she specifies to herself: "Why was it that I had never stabbed a man before? I realized that I had been afraid, and that the fear had been within me all the time, until the fleeting moment when I read

fear in his eyes" represents that Firdaus turned out the one who possessed fear throughout her entire existence (90); She considered that being afraid was an inherent component of her womanhood. She realizes he is as fragile and afraid as she is. Men, too, sense fear, as revealed by their physical traits. She has the bravery to assassinate someone and confess to the patriarchal regime. Finally, she has shown her courage by proving that she is no longer vulnerable, but rather the bravest.

In a comparable manner, Mariam has taken a brave step to protect Laila and her children from Rasheed. She remarks that "he'd taken so much from her in twenty-seven years of marriage. She would not watch him take Laila too" features she consented to whatever he has done to her, but she will never allow him to do such things to Laila and her offspring (337). She will not put up with any more torture from him. She would break the cycle. When she made the choice to execute him, she stated to herself that "she wanted him to see. He looked up. Mariam swung" insists that she hopes for him to realize that she is no longer that nineteen-year-old fragile hearted Mariam, but has the strength and courage to do everything in her power to save her loved ones (337). On the day of her execution, she felt "She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A mother. A person of consequence at last" conveys Mariam using her own demise as a means of exchange to secure Laila's autonomy (361). She is being executed not for being a bad mate but because she is a liberator who contends that she is of greater consequence than the law that kills her. In addition, she speculates "this was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings" emphasizing that even though one's birth cannot be controlled, the moral nature of one's actions can (361). Drawing on Gilbert and Gubar's framework, the "Angel of death" (601) represents the moment Mariam destroys the persona of the self-sacrificing "angel" forced upon her by an abusive society, thereby reclaiming her autonomy. The "Angel in the House" refers to a selfless

woman who suffers quietly (596). By rejecting this angel image, Mariam destroys the part of herself that patriarchy—seen in her husband's cruelty—tried to control. Her husband's abuse was meant to keep her obedient, but his violence led Mariam to let go of her submissive side. When she delivers the fatal blow, she not only kills a man but erases the obedient, silent woman she was forced to become. This symbolic act is needed for Mariam to become a protector. The "Angel of death" is a double metaphor: it marks the end of forced innocence and the start of her agency. Ultimately, her story shows that even violent acts can help people break free from oppression. This chosen agency is what lends legitimacy to her conclusion. She is no longer an added burden to Jalil or a piece of property belonging to Rasheed; she is a martyr for her own beliefs.

In the novel *The Color Purple*, Celie started her own business with the help of Shug. She leaves for Memphis, leaving her abusive husband alone. Her husband asks her how she makes a living; she mentions "making pants" which suggests Celie sews out of necessity or to please others (213). Now, she sews for profit and passion. Celie offers a profound redirection to the question posed by Gilbert and Gubar: "What shall I do to gratify myself or be admired" from the trivial utility of running a household for men who disrespect her dignity (600). Next, she starts her own business and makes pants, transforming a traditional domestic skill into a weapon of remunerative liberation. As a result, she gains her financial independence needed to escape the abusive situation. Achieving economic autonomy becomes a critical step in her restoration. It marks the moment she stops being a utility object defined by others and begins to prioritize her own free will and desires.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Woman at Point Zero, A Thousand Splendid Suns, and The Color Purple are engaging and insightful in feminine discourse. These novels displaying the journey of women from victimhood to agency is not only a mere change in circumstances, but a profound psychological renovation. This comparative study has demonstrated how patriarchal shackles function as a mechanism of destruction. Within a male-dominated system, domestic abuse and objectification work in tandem which reduces women to a passive position. To answer the research question, this study posits that reclaiming autonomy is a spiritual process triggered by external catalysts. The intervention of specific supportive figures provided intellectual pedagogy essential for the protagonists to disassemble patriarchal myths and emphasize their own desire and goal. This comparative study analyses the novels through Beauvoir, and Gilbert and Gubar's feminist frameworks which suggest that autonomy is achieved through killing of the "angel of the house". This classification refers to the killing of the internalized submissive identity, and by doing so, the protagonists emerge as sovereign subjects who define their own value.

This research provides a remarkable contribution to the feminist debate in literature by spanning the geographical and cultural parts in North African, Middle Eastern, and African-American narratives through an integrated theoretical lens. Analyzing these texts individually limits the insights that a comparative study of thematically similar works could provide. This study fills this research gap and presents a comparative analysis of how the female protagonists can restore their agency. Moreover, this study reinterprets the radical act of the central figures where Firdaus's assassination of her pimp, Mariam's shield of her family, and Celie's financial rebellion are not only tragedies, but a subversive pointer to the reclamation of voice and position.

Moreover, the importance of the study lies in its contribution to the feminist literary criticism as it allows readers, critics, and scholars to deepen their understanding of the texts and delve into not only the deconstruction of the original texts but also the dismantling of patriarchal implications and legacies.

Future research could apply theoretical lenses provided by Beauvoir, and Gilbert and Gubar's to study South Asian literature, for instance, *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali. This can be helpful to examine how regional culture affects the reclamation of autonomy. A central finding of this research is that sanctuary offered by patriarchal figures is strictly conditional, exchanging an oasis of well-being for a woman's silence and passivity. Further research in the field can apply a materialist feminist lens to examine how specific urban and rural economic structures—such as the sex work industry in Cairo versus the domestic pants business in the American South—dictate the speed of a protagonist's renovation. Scholars might investigate whether economic independence is a prerequisite for, or a result of, the spiritual process of reclaiming worth in a commodified world. This study touched upon how labels like "harami" or unrespectable are used to strip women of legal and social rights. A worthwhile continuation may integrate postcolonial and intersectional theories to analyze how race and class specifically modify the "Othering" process.

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