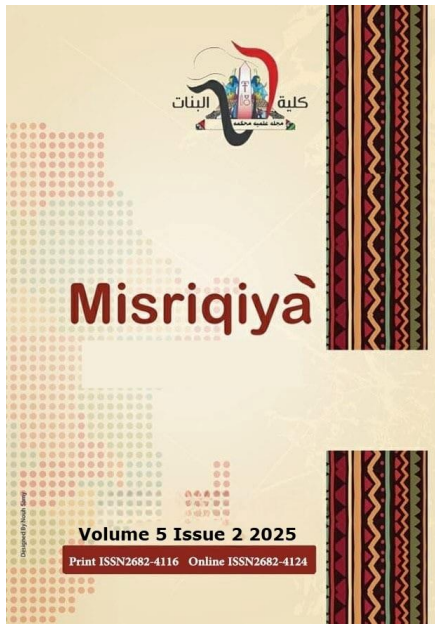




Reclaiming the Self: Gender, Performance, and Resistance in Latifa al Zayyat's *The Open Door*

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Abstract

This paper examines *The Open Door*, a 1960 novel by Egyptian writer Latifa al-Zayyat. It is a book that explores a middle-class girl's coming of age against the background of struggling with societal expectations, gender norms, and oppression. Al Zayyat, who was a forward-thinking writer, used her works to challenge patriarchal societies and give voice to the voiceless women. This is what continued to influence other Arab writers, while tackling the same feminine issue. Accordingly, through this bildungsroman, the paper traces Layla's journey toward self-actualization, highlighting her defiance of patriarchal structures, stereotyping, and marginalization. Through her resistance, Layla challenges restrictive social norms, ultimately asserting women's agency in the public sphere. Employing Judith Butler's concept of performativity, alongside with Josephine Donovan's *Images of Women* approach, the analysis reveals how Layla's experiences reflect the multifaceted oppression that women endure and their capacity for resistance, showing how her transformation challenges traditional depictions of women as passive and submissive, asserting the power of female self-determination.

Keywords: Latifa al Zayyat, *The Open Door*, patriarchy, gender and performance theory, female emancipation

Introduction

Latifa Abdelsalam al Zayyat was born in Damietta on August 8, 1923, to an upper-middle-class family and died in 1996 at the age of 73. She is a well-known Egyptian activist, professor, and writer who wrote many literary works, including short stories and novels, such as *The Search: Personal Papers* (1996), *The Owner of the House* (1994), and *The Open Door* (1960). She earned her Bachelor's degree in 1946 and her Doctoral degree in 1957 from Cairo University. She is considered one of the pioneers of the novel in Egypt and the Arab world. Al Zayyat influenced the Arabic literature and authors both personally and professionally.

The Open Door by al Zayyat was translated into English by Marilyn Booth in 2000. It is perceived as "al-Zayyat's magnum opus"(Booth, 2017) and was awarded the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature in 1996. It is a semi-autobiographical novel that explores the underestimation of women in Egypt and portrays it as a patriarchal society, and introduces her as a feminist who intended to support women and empower them. Al Zayyat is a major example of the writers who presented the reality of women as powerful and active. This literary work was filmed in 1963 and was considered a distinguished story for self-realization, political, and sexual awakening. This novel was "strikingly modern for its time, not only in its depiction of the central character's political and sexual development, but also in its use of dialogue and colloquial language, a stylistic choice that is still considered politically, culturally, and religiously divisive"(Johnson-Davies,2006, p. 462). It follows a non-linear form of narration as it goes back and forth between the personal and the social and between different periods of time. It is a first-person narrative that helps the reader to be connected with the protagonist's thoughts and feelings. The author of the novel also used symbolism throughout her writing. For example, she symbolized Layla's relationship with her fiancé, Ramzi, as a fly drowning in a cup of tea to explain her struggle with him and her inability around him. This image further illustrates Layla's belief that she is a free spirit meant to fly, while her fiancé suppresses her to the point of paralysis (Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 268). Moreover, the title itself is a symbol for the protagonist's conflicts and her yearning for freedom. Oppressed, Layla symbolizes the occupied nation, and her freedom later on symbolizes the nation's liberation. Al Zayyat also portrayed a range of characters with diverse personalities, depicting both passive and active females. *The Open Door* tells the story of the protagonist Layla, her family and

friends, including her brother, Mahmoud, their aunt and cousins, as well as her friends, Adila and Sanaa; Husayn, Mahmoud's friend, and Layla's professor Ramzi.

Literature Review

The once avant-garde novel, *The Open Door* introduces a number of considerable themes like gender, women's roles, power, morals, fundamentals, resistance, and revolution. It has consequently attracted significant scholarly attention. Previous studies of *The Open Door* discussed many aspects related to the protagonist's emancipation and relating it to the Egyptian political context. A study by Zamil, Nasser, and Hashem tackled the female protagonist from a post-colonial lens and focused on her psychological and moral growth from childhood to adulthood. Additionally, regarding the struggles Layla faced in her society as a woman, and how she managed to unite with her true self. However, the research did not fully explore how Layla's freedom mirrors Egypt's liberation. Khaled Afifi's focused on the cultural challenges Marilyn Booth faces while translating from Arabic to English. Here, the author raised a debate about whether Booth succeeded in conveying the relation between Layla's emancipation and Egypt's independence or not. Similarly, Viola Shafik examines the film adaptation of the novel, highlighting how the film downplays the role of female resistance and struggle in favor of focusing on the national struggle. Also published in 2011, two studies offering distinct criticisms of the novel are worth noting. The first, by Tahoun et al., aims to highlight the important role of women alongside men in freeing their nation, highlighting how al Zayyat portrayed women as active participants for a better future. She introduced Layla to the readers as a strong Egyptian woman who struggled to free her nation and emancipate herself. The second study, a comparative study with Daneshvar's Suvashun, demonstrates to what extent Layla's character mirrors al Zayyat's own character. Faten Morsy showed that Layla suffered from oppression as an Egyptian girl in her society and how nationalism was a huge part of her life, but the main focus of the research was university. Morsy wanted to explore a certain point or phase in the protagonist's life in which she believed that university was the space for her to be free and be heard. However, it turned out to be a jail-like place because of her professor, Ramzi. All the above research dealt with *The Open Door* novel from different perspectives, yet this paper attempts to show the marginalization, stereotyping,

oppression and the degradation of women, their role in the society, and how the protagonist overcame them and reached self-actualization. Latifa al Zayyat was pioneering and ahead of her time, addressing all of these struggles.

During the 1960s, Egyptian women faced many struggles, including the responsibilities forced upon them domestically and the call to contribute to the national struggle. In Egyptian society, women suffered from hardships as compared to their male counterparts. They were treated unequally, stereotyped as weak, emotive, brainless, and passive. Men always underestimated and expected submissiveness from them. Those who did not obey the rules and followed the society's fundamentals agonized: "If she were to show the slightest rebelliousness or excitability, her mother would scold her by the hour. Her father would yank her from bed to deliver a lesson in morals"(Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 31). They were expected to be good wives, mothers, and daughters, besides being active in the liberation movements. They were given controlled employment and educational opportunities. That is to say, they were given the right to work and be educated, but expected the same level of obedience and focus on their home and family. They were confined by social traditions and expectations. That is how they interlinked the fight for independence for themselves and their nation, and this is what, in fact, fueled the feminist movement. Accordingly, the publication of *The Open Door* was a literary landmark of unquestionable importance for self-expression in Egyptian society, paralleling national liberation with women's emancipation. It also crystallizes the essential role of women in society.

Theoretical Framework

Guided by Josephine Donovan's "Images of Women", bell hooks' insistent call to end all forms of interlocking oppression, and Judith Butler's concept of performativity, this paper offers a multifaceted analysis of the patriarchal structures, forms of oppression, and the subversion of gender norms depicted in the novel. Both Josephine Donovan, and Judith Butler addressed the female struggle, though they approached it from different angles. Donovan, from a literary feminist theory and social perspective, showed how women suffered from men's control in patriarchal societies and that they were given limited opportunities. She rejected the stereotypes of women and emphasized the importance of their role in society. In contrast, Butler adopted a gender theory from a performative perspective. In other words, she wanted to prove that the way women act is something forced upon

them, and they subconsciously follow. She reinforced challenging these repetitive acts to reach freedom and equality.

Josephine Donovan (1941-), an American scholar of comparative literature and a professor of English, considered feminist criticism as moral criticism; she stated: "Feminist criticism is moral because it sees that one of the central problems of Western literature is that in much of it women are not human beings, seats of consciousness. They are objects, who are not to facilitate, explain away, or redeem the projects of men" (Donovan, 1989, p. 267). She concentrated on the 'images of women' approach and how men perceived women in literature. They stereotyped them and considered them as creatures who exist only to serve the interests of men. Donovan rejected these stereotypes and challenged those views that uphold women as Others. Furthermore, by adopting the 'images of women' approach Donovan exposed how alienating literature can be for the female reader, considering women as others and defining them just as related to how they serve the interests of men. Women who serve any male figure were categorized as good women (good-woman stereotypes), and those who refuse to do so were categorized as bad or evil women. They were portrayed as old maids, career women, witches, and even lesbians. Similarly, Cynthia Griffin Wolff (1972), argues in her article on women stereotypes that: "...the relationship between women and men is treated as if it were the only meaningful relationship that a woman has; thus her relationships with other women, with children, and with society in general are significantly diminished " (p. 207). Furthermore, women were often portrayed as merely emotional creatures who cannot think or create.

To understand the mechanism of emancipation, we turn to the work of bell hooks and Judith Butler. bell hooks, pseudonym of Gloria Jean Watkins (1952-2021), is an American scholar who argued that it is not only about equality between women and men but also about ending all forms of oppression (hooks, 1984, p. 31). She believes that feminism should encompass all people who are exploited, discriminated against, and/or oppressed. hooks in her book *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* stated that Feminism started off as a movement to end sexist oppression, but it would be better defined as "the movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (p. viii). This definition maintains that the movement is not about being "anti-male". It makes clear "that the problem is sexism, and that clarity helps us remember that all of us, female and male, have

been socialized from birth on to accept sexist thought and action" (p. viii). Feminism joins a larger fight against all "systems of domination," including those that influence males, if it is defined as a fight against sexist oppression.

This phenomenon of being reduced to an object or a stereotype is precisely what Layla experiences. Layla was oppressed through being marginalized, stereotyped and silenced. Her oppression is a testament to the condition bell hooks describes in *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*. hooks (1984) argues that, "To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body" (Preface). Women used to be marginalized and deprived of their rights as human beings. Men considered them as owning no importance. They were women who, in Friedan's (2013) words, were "told by the most advanced thinkers of our time to go back and live their lives as if they were Noras, restricted to the doll's house by Victorian prejudices" ("The Sexual Solipsism of Sigmund Freud"). Marginalized women do not have the freedom to choose. They are oppressed and subjugated unable to speak, to write and to work.

That is why feminist critics like Josephine Donovan, bell hooks, and Judith Butler worked to give voice to the voiceless. They challenged the enforced gender norms that oppress, marginalize, and restrict women in the domestic spheres. Thus, feminist criticism was established as a major field of literary studies to argue these norms and reflect the political goals of feminism. Consequently, women were not only suppressed within their homes or through literature, but they were also violated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by scientists who wanted to prove that women have inferior distinctions that cannot be changed and that is inherent. This paper proves the strength of women and their importance in society.

Gender and Performance Theory

Judith Pamela Butler (1956-), an American feminist philosopher and a theorist of power, sexuality, and identity, considers that sex is nature and gender is culture. Butler sees that gender is not determined by being male or female but by acquired behavior, a performance that is socially shared, historically constituted, and performative. In other words, gender is not what we are but what we do through a continuous, "stylized repetition of acts through time" (Butler, 1988, p.520). She coined the term "gender performativity" in her book *Gender Trouble* in 1990, stating that gender is an act that is performed, "broadly construed" (Butler, "1988, p.528). In this framework, gender is a set of forced images upon the

two sexes. Butler argues that women, in particular, have been historically prevented from shaping their own identities. The solution, she suggests, is to redefine gender by revealing the hidden mechanisms of the social structure (Singh, 2022). Butler believes that social performances must be repeated for human life to function as ritual social drama. However, Butler's main concern is the experience of women; she emphasizes the idea of the diverse and different experiences of women rather than their common femaleness. Building on thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir (1973)—who argued “one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one” (p. 301)—and anthropologist Victor Turner's concept of social drama, Butler sees gender as a ritualistic performance that must be constantly repeated to maintain its illusion of naturalness. While her main concern is the experience of women, she emphasizes their varied experiences rather than showing common aims.

The Oppressive Societal Structures

Patriarchy

The first part of the analysis deals with the oppressive societal structure and the different forms of oppression that Layla struggled with, whilst the second part tackles the overcoming of oppression and Layla's journey towards self-fulfillment. Patriarchy is a systemic oppression, as theorized by Donovan and hooks, that is vividly dramatized in the life of Layla, from early girlhood to the point when she became a mature woman. She lived under a patriarchy, a type of society in which men are viewed as superior and having more value than women, which is evident in how she was treated as an inferior thing compared to her brother Mahmoud, whose father used to look at as a miracle (Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 27). Here lies the importance of a feminist worldview; it will help men and women break free from patriarchal ideas and behaviors, ultimately creating a truly human world devoid of hierarchy and dominance (Lerner, 1986, p. 229). This parallels the concept of ending all forms of oppression, as noted by hooks. She did not focus on the equality between women and men, but on creating a world free from injustice towards both.

The Open Door represents Egyptian society and its core beliefs that women are less important than men; however, it proves by its end that they possess innate power that helps them overcome oppression. This is how al Zayyat decided to join the debate: "Female writing is not simply a passive reflection of patriarchy; women do not assume the image created by men" (Al Zayyat, 1994a, p. 184). In addition,

Layla was surrounded by social limitations because she is a female. Sometimes, she forced herself to act in a certain way in front of her father, "She worked her mouth into a polite smile"(Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 13). Her father, as a male figure, had the upper hand and gave himself the right to subject her to physical and psychological violence. She did not have the free will to speak or to explain herself or her feelings. She is afraid of her father, Sulayman Effendi, who considered her a weak and helpless girl, says, "Lord, give me strength! She's just a helpless girl"(Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 21). When her father saw her demonstrating with other females, he violated her physically "he brings out the slipper concealed behind his back. He tried to throw her to the floor, but her mother slipped between them"(Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 49). After this, Layla locked herself in her room, refrained from eating or drinking, and she suddenly remembered something that her family thought of as a joke, but according to Layla she remained psychologically bullied:

Layla isn't really our daughter. We found her at the entrance to the mosque. Look, Mahmud, even our skin—you and I are light, and so is Mama, but Layla—only Layla has such dark skin." She had stared at her mother, who had laughed. "We found her in a little bundle, poor miserable thing," her mother had chuckled. "Let's raise her, we said, and get our reward in heaven. (Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 51)

The above quotation also shows that stereotypical images of women are pervasive, demonstrating that even within Egyptian society, light-skinned women were more privileged than dark-skinned women. This incident illustrates a colorist hierarchy where dark-skinned women were stereotyped as less beautiful and desirable.

While her father's abuse was overtly physical, Layla also underwent psychological abuse because of her fiancé, Ramzi, to an extent that she felt occupied, not engaged to him: "Layla spread her fingers, staring astonished at her engagement ring, as if she had forgotten that it occupied her hand"(Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 353). He constantly demeaned her and described her as a child. He is a major example for those who believed that females belong to a certain sphere: "When will we grow up? Outgrow these childish ideas? When will we understand that everyone has his own sphere?"(Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 248). Ramzi, like her father, always focused on folding Layla's eyes to underestimate her and to suppress her desire to gain self-awareness. Reflecting on Butler's gender and performance

theory, Ramzi is an example of her concept of performativity. He consistently acts like a patriarch who controls and dominates Layla, just as a series of repeated acts that his society implanted in his mind. Patriarchy means control and Ramzi intended to marry Layla because he believed that she was obedient and submissive so that he could control her. When she asked him if he wanted to marry her because her personality worked with his, she waited for a certain answer. She wanted him to say that he loves her. But instead, he said: "Of course. Because you are compliant and quiet, and you listen to me, and you do what I say." (Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 268). Ramzi, as an oppressor in a patriarchal society, just wanted to maintain authority, thereby mirroring the broader Egyptian society at that time.

Stereotyping

Different forms of oppression intersect to oppress the female characters in the novel. They were oppressed by men just for being women, by the society, its restrictions and expectations, and by the roles imposed upon them as women and housewives. Women were not even respected, and they were stereotyped by their exaggerated reactions. For example, when Mahmoud got shot, his mother felt worried, although the father assured her that "the doctor said it was a simple wound, no more than a scratch" (Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 6). This incident directly engages with Josephine Donovan's feminist project by challenging the stereotypical image of the "hysterical" or irrational woman. Through Layla's journey, al Zayyat systematically works to break down these false images, employing her protagonist not just to fight but to uproot such patriarchal stereotypes.

Layla always felt under pressure because of what people would say about her actions. Her mother, Saniya, gave high importance to the people around her and to what society would think and say about her daughter. She could be described as the "guarantor of a desired social order" (Lawler, 2000, p. 56). She believed that rejecting the morals and traditions is something "improper" and "inappropriate," she told her daughter: "There's something dear, called the fundamentals----the rules, the right way to behave" (Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 23). Saniya's beliefs correspond to the concept of good women stereotypes by Josephine Donovan who fought the patriarchal concept that men are "Selves" and women are "Others" or shadow of the self as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) described (p. 24). She believed that according to the male dominated societies, women who agreed to suppression were appraised as good and those who fought against it were deemed as bad. Layla's

mother is considered a great example, highlighting the good woman stereotype. She was a passive housewife who obeyed her husband's orders without thinking, as she believed he is wiser and more intelligent than her ." For Sulayman Effendi was smarter and wiser, Saniya thought in relief, more able to resolve such a situation, the like of which her family had never witnessed"(Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 96).

Women were presumed to be housewives even if they were given the chance to be educated. Marriage was viewed as their priority. This pressure is vividly portrayed in Layla's internal monologue about marriage, where, while acknowledging her own fears, she stated:

Marry whom? Any old person; after all, "the only thing that can shame a man is his pocket." So she'd put on that white veil, and she would move to the husband's residence, "because that's the way the world works." And everything was just so easy and straightforward and understood by all. But . . . but she would have to be very careful indeed. She must not have feelings or emotions; she must not use her mind, or fall in love. Or else—or else they would kill her, as they had killed Safaa. (Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 39)

This oppressive system is further clarified in a conversation between Layla and her cousin Isam: "You mean, Gamila won't go to university?" asked Layla. Isam smiled. "And you will" "Why wouldn't I go?" "What use would it be? Every girl's future is marriage"(Al Zayyat, 2017, p.80). This echoes what Donovan challenged, the concept of the 'good women stereotypes' that limits women's place to their home and their importance to fulfilling the needs of men. Women were seen as future wives not doctors, teachers or engineers. Those who want to have career or participate in the public life were placed in the 'bad women' stereotypes category and this is what Donovan criticized in the patriarchal societies. Stereotyping women is evident in the novel through another conversation between Isam and Layla. He said: "I'm sick of this. I want to love a regular girl, who thinks like girls think, and feels like they do. I'm sick of you, and of your philosophizing, and your moods." (Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 119). He reduced Layla or women in general to a fixed set of thoughts and qualities. He imprisoned them within specific gender roles that avoids any critical thinking.

In direct opposition to this prescribed fate, Layla emerges as an active character who believes that she is an educated person who is not supposed to surrender, arguing, "Even animals choose their mates!" (Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 75). Al

Zayyat also strategically represents weak female characters like Adila, Layla's friend, and Gamila, her cousin, who conform to the rules forced on them. They serve as foils to Layla because they obeyed the social constraints without fighting for change: "You've been back-and-forthing about things that are already decided for us anyway"(Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 77). Adila is a passive woman who believes in the traditional way of getting married and her priority is to find a husband and be a good wife for him. In addition to her, there is Gamila. She is not as weak as Adila but she is tied to the fundamentals of her society that believes a woman just has to get married to a rich husband and that is what she, in fact, did. They adopted what Butler referred to as the repetitive acts that their society forced them to follow.

Marginalization

Upon reaching adulthood, her parents banned her from going out alone. Her father said: "Layla, you must realize that you have grown up. From now on, you are absolutely not to go out by yourself. No visits. Straight home from school" (Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 22) as if it is a sin that she grew up. They did not await an answer from her, they expected submissiveness. "Layla said nothing. No one expected any word from her"(Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 22). Layla's father agreed to her engagement to Ramzi without asking for her opinion "Congratulations, Layla! We read the sacred Fatiha together---the word of God in the sight of God."(Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 250). Equivalent to bell hooks' (1984) definition of oppression as a lack of choices (p. 5), Layla was oppressed as she did not have an opportunity to choose whether to accept or reject their decision. Layla also struggled to feel accepted from both her family and society and her struggle with her mother's never-ending role kept her feeling disempowered. Being the shadow is being marginalized and kept away from the public sphere of life. In this regard, Jane Freedman (2001) further explained women's exclusion and oppression:

Women were judged to be less reasonable than men, more ruled by emotion, and thus incapable of political decision-making, for example. These types of assertions by philosophers and political theorists were supported by anatomists and biologists who, as scientific knowledge of the human body advanced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, began to use data such as measurements of brain size to establish a difference in intelligence between men and women. (p. 12)

So, this illustrates how women's abilities were denied to validate their exclusion from public domain. As observed above, the issue of women's feelings was not given proper consideration. Thus, having patriarchy, gender oppression, stereotyping, and marginalization as major themes, al Zayyat portrayed women's struggles as paving the way for them to find their identity and to establish their individuality. So, Layla never gave up on demonstrations and fighting for liberation, as if she were fighting for her own freedom, not only her nation's.

It was through this very struggle that Layla became aware of her strength and abilities. This reflects Butler's main concern about the importance of women to be aware that they matter and why they matter in order to shape their own experiences, so that they can reach their own self.

Overcoming Oppression and Discovering the True Self

Layla started her journey to find her true self through overcoming the oppression she suffered from. She did not just undergo external conflicts like those with her father and fiancé, but also internal conflicts with herself. she succeeded through her determination, mind and strength and with the help of her friends and her lover Husayn liberate herself. Once Layla realized that she is following certain gender roles forced upon her, she exerted her utmost effort to fight them and challenged the stereotypical images and roles assigned to her under the name of fundamentals. Oppressing and stereotyping women forced them to act upon a certain frame of dogmatic rules under the name of fundamentals and societal traditions, and this is how females become women. According to Judith Butler, gender is performative in this way, as it is something socially constructed. As observed from the novel, Sanyia, Layla's mother, performed according to the socially constructed identity of a woman so she became a good example for the image of woman who is passive and submissive. She always tried to shape her daughter as she believed all females should be "obedient participants in the hierarchy, transmitting values of the dominant culture and perpetuat[ing] hierarchical societal arrangements" (Trebilcot, 1983, p. 1). On the contrary, Layla, who fought following these performative acts, she succeeded in freeing herself and reaching self-realization by the end of the novel because "Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed"(Butler, 1990, p.27).

Layla tried to overcome oppression and the rules that her family forced her to act upon "the *usul* is a recurrent idea that underlines the narrative and becomes a key target in Layla's fight against middle-class morality. Rules of propriety are the instruments of Layla's oppression and the target of her rebellion" (Elsadda, 2012, p. 102-03). Layla started questioning what is right and what is wrong, and this is when she realized that she needs to think and find out for herself "What's right? What's wrong? I don't know whom to believe. Or whom not to believe. Or what to believe, or what not to believe. What should I believe? Who's right?" (Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 54). By doing so, the protagonist is addressing what Butler identified as a problem that females did not have the opportunity to experience and shape their own personalities. Through following the drawn path of masculine-oriented societies, females become women. One of the things that empowered her was her friend Sanaa. Sanaa is more like Layla, a strong female who believes that they should marry out of love and that each one of them has her own ideas and personality:

The whole mentality has changed," said Sanaa. "There's no doubt about that. For our mothers, marriage was a fate written on their foreheads from the day they were born. No one could change it in the slightest or escape it. You had to accept it as it was. For us the situation is so different, because the harem mentality has changed. Today's girl doesn't accept what her mother took as a given. (Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 76)

She is a good example of a newer perspective of feminism and females who started to apprehend the world around them and act according to their own mindset. Sanaa also opposed Layla's marriage from Ramzi and described the female who would marry him as: "Whoever marries him will be put in the deep freeze and locked up" (Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 269). She never stopped supporting her friend, and she clearly symbolizes women solidarity in the novel. bell hooks believed that women's bonding and sisterhood is like a path that helps females to overcome oppression and to be empowered. As an example of female empowerment in the novel and having it as one of the novel themes, the reader finds how Sanaa helped Layla in her emancipation process. Her teacher, for example, was her role model. She wished to be like her not like her mother: "To grow older. To become like her mother. No! To become like . . . like the history supervisor who helped their teachers, the woman with the broad, pale forehead, who held her head so erect," (Al

Zayyat, 2017, p. 20) her teacher's strong personality pushed her to fight silence and passivity. Nevertheless, there were male characters that served as a catalyst for Layla's transformation, for example, Husayn. He empowered and opened her eyes to the fact that she needed to find her authentic self. He believed that she needed someone to awaken her: "You need someone to shake you hard until you wake up" (Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 178). In fact, he decided to be this person. "To reach the shore," Husayn said with deliberation, "we have to face the waves and the open ocean." "You'll find what it is that you've lost, you'll find yourself, you'll find the true Layla"(Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 188-89). Husayn is an example for hooks' concept that feminism is not here to eliminate men but rather to establish a life devoid of oppression for women and men. Unlike Isam, Layla's cousin who was a coward and a lustful person who followed the society's fundamentals and Ramzi, her fiancé who belittled, marginalized and oppressed her "his very presence oppressive, constricting every breathe she took"(Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 227), and her father whom she used to fear and struggle with, Husayn was someone who forced Layla to confront her fears, limits and internal dilemma and helped her to reach her own genuine self. He encouraged her to open the door for her feelings and thoughts. "She saw herself walking steadily to a closed door and giving it a push"(Al Zayyat, 2017, p.217). This mirrors Donovan and Butler's concept about the importance of women's personal experiences. They asserted that women have to know their worth in order to be able to overcome their subjugated life. Once Layla understood her emotions and needs, she had the power to overcome her struggles and strive for change.

However, it was challenging to reach her true identity. Layla underwent internal conflicts and faced a lot of struggles. At a certain time, Layla felt defeated, and she doubted her journey. She felt that maybe Gamila, her cousin is right: "She had listened to her mother and she had followed sanctioned practice. She had followed those fundamentals and therefore life had been good to her. Life had offered its bounty, its contentment, its security" (Al Zayyat, 2017, p.155). Layla, desired freedom, but she had to face the passivity of her mother, which disempowered her, the oppressive father, the cowardly cousin, the narcissist fiancé, and all of the societal expectations and gender roles. Isam was not just Layla's cousin; he is one of the male characters with whom Layla struggled. As Donovan states about the stereotypical images of women, he used to treat her as a thing that

he owns, and he resorted to violence and aggression towards her when they quarreled: "You belong to me! You're mine! My property! Understand?" (Al Zayyat, 2017, p.133). She thought at first that he loved her, but then she discovered that he had an affair with his servant. He cheated on Layla, and he did not have the courage to announce their love to their families. Isam even sexually exploited both Layla and the servant, Sayyida. This is one of the main issues that hooks(2000) wanted to end: the sexist exploitation that women face in their societies. She believed that feminism is a movement to end it (p. viii).

Layla got engaged to Dr Ramzi, who was her former professor at college. He never let Layla express her mind without disdaining her: "DR. RAMZI'S CAMPAIGN TO DISTRESS Layla continued in class and outside the lecture hall as well. He pressed so hard that, alone with her friends, she would cry out in desperation, "What does that man want from me?" (Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 227). He humiliated and mocked her believing that she is just a woman whose place is her home and that she does not have to work her mind: "You're philosophizing, but philosophy isn't a pot of stew on the stove, Miss." "Do you know what it is you need? You need brakes—brakes on your imagination"(Al Zayyat, 2017, p. 228). He dismisses her thoughts and feelings because he is afraid of her. As an Egyptian man, he cannot stand facing a woman whom he feels as intellectually aware and voiced. Ultimately, Layla went to Port Said to work as a teacher. Against her fiancé's will she went there, and this increased her confidence, and she started to actually be politically active. She challenged her performative identity and all of the imposed restrictions put on her by leaving her family and her fiancé to start her journey of awareness and finally reach independence and freedom. Layla's journey of self-realization is connected with her determination and resistance against the restrictions forced upon her as a woman in the 20th-century Egyptian society. Her determination helped her to overcome her father's control, to refuse her domestic role in society, and to seek education by which she became able to speak her mind in school and college and also to reject the relationships that failed to correspond with her personal growth. Layla joined the nationalist movement through which she proved her active role in society and in her nation's liberation struggle not just hers. In this way Layla gained her freedom and discovered herself.

To conclude, the paper has explored a multilayered analysis of the patriarchal structures, systemic marginalization, and subverted gender norms by

employing Josephine Donovan's images of women approach, bell hooks' concept of oppression, and Judith Butler's gender and performance theory. Layla's journey towards self-realization and awareness obliged her to oppose her family, who marginalized her, her fiancé, who belittled her, and her society, together with the unstable political life at that time, which Layla was part of. Layla also went through internal conflicts as well as external conflicts that helped her to shape her identity. By doing so, Layla deconstructed the performative identity that was imposed over her and she proved the falsity of the stereotypical images of women in her society. Through Layla's journey, al Zayyat challenged the traditional notions of womanhood and got over all patterns of injustices from which women suffered. Moreover, al Zayyat succeeded in intervening in the debate, empowering and voicing women and presenting herself as one of the main writers who wisely represented the reality of women as strong and assertive through her prominent novel.

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