

**A Foucauldian Reading of Fathia al-Assal's
*The Women's Prison***

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Abstract

This study examines how the theoretical insights and ideologies of the French sociologist Michel Foucault are contextualized in the Egyptian playwright Fathia al-Assal's play *The Women's Prison* (1993) in which institutions prove to be containers of power structures, punitive forms, strict social and political disciplines, and modes of resistance. Significantly, the Foucauldian thought takes an oppositional stance to dismantle the diacritics associated with power and punishment through delving deeply into the disciplines which constitute them. Under such a prism, the study investigates how institutions shape the human psychology of Egyptian women through an oppressive consciousness, thereby generating dissonance in characters and engaging the reader's empathy with their plight. The play comprises a plethora of women prisoners who advocate political protests and the restructuring of state institutions being part of the overall power structure under which they exist. The playwright integrates polyphonic voices from different social categories to give her fragmented characters an opportunity for articulation and self-representation. Being socially outcast, these women are ostracized by the authoritarian state, so they are put in jail, an oppressive institution in which the playwright gives a voice to the marginalized, voiceless women. Thus, the play is an indictment of the burdensome power dynamics and punishments which weigh upon variable slices of Egyptian women. Moreover, the playwright is attentive to power relations under patriarchy and materialism and how these structures force women to fall into the abyss of crime, thereby depicting their non-conformity as a survival and anti-oppression mechanism.

Keywords: Foucault, power, punishment, institution, discipline, resistance.

قراءة فوكوية لمسرحية "سجن النساء" لفتحية العسال

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مستخلص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية وضع الرؤى النظرية والأيدولوجيات لعالم الاجتماع الفرنسي ميشيل فوكو في سياق مسرحية "سجن النساء" (1993) للكاتبة المسرحية المصرية فتحية العسال، حيث أثبتت المؤسسات إنها حاويات لأنماط السلطة، وأشكال العقاب، والضوابط الاجتماعية والسياسية الصارمة، وأنماط المقاومة. بشكل ملحوظ، يتخذ الفكر الفوكوي موقفاً معارضاً من أجل تفكيك الترميزات المرتبطة بالسلطة والعقاب من خلال الخوض بعمق في الضوابط التي تُشكلها. من هذا المنظور، تبحث الدراسة في كيفية قيام المؤسسات بتشكيل التركيبة النفسية للمرأة المصرية من خلال الوعي القمعي، وبالتالي توليد التنافر داخل الشخصيات، وإدماج القارئ في التعاطف مع محتتهن. تضم المسرحية عدداً كبيراً من النساء اللواتي يُدافعن عن الاحتجاجات السياسية، وإعادة هيكلة مؤسسات الدولة، باعتبارها جزءاً من هيكل السلطة العام الذي يتواجدن تحت قبضته. وقد أشركت الكاتبة أصواتاً متعددة من فئات اجتماعية مختلفة لمنح شخصياتها المُمزقة فرصة للتعبير وتمثيل الذات. ولكونهن مُنشقات اجتماعياً، فإن هؤلاء النسوة يتم النظر إليهن كمنبوذات من قبل الدولة الاستبدادية، ولذلك يتم وضعهن في السجن الذي يُمثل مؤسسة قمعية تُعطي فيه الكاتبة صوتاً للنساء المُهمشات اللاتي لا صوت لهن. وبناءً عليه، فإن المسرحية تُمثل إدانة لديناميكيات السلطة القهرية والعقاب التي تُثقل كاهل شرائح مختلفة من النساء المصريات. فضلاً عن ذلك، فإن الكاتبة تهتم بعلاقات السلطة في ظل النظام الأبوي والمادي، وكيف تُجبر هذه التركيبات النساء على الوقوع في هاوية الجريمة، وبالتالي يتم تصوير عدم امتثالهن للضوابط على أنه آلية للبقاء ومناهضة القمع.

الكلمات المفتاحية: فوكو، السلطة، العقاب، المؤسسة، الضوابط، المقاومة.

Introduction

This study incorporates insights from the prolific French sociologist Michel Foucault (1926-1984) into Fathia al-Assal's influential play *The Women's Prison* (1993) for the purpose of investigating how the Foucauldian thought is contextualized in the play. Significantly, the play attempts to dismantle the diacritics of women's plight and custodial humiliation in oppressive institutions, notably the household, the street, and the prison, through the exposure of the projections of power, punishment, discipline, and resistance in order to find an outlet for women prisoners towards self-awareness and self-representation. al-Assal's drama examines how the oppressive social, economic, and political circumstances shape the consciousness of these women, thereby throwing them into the abyss of crime which can be taken to be their overlapping survival and anti-oppression mechanism. Put differently, their revolt against power structures, punitive forms, and strict disciplines provides a possibility to rethink the sense of disorientation associated with the multi-layered forms of oppression with which they find themselves face-to-face, thus trying to pave the way towards a better human identity which is hard to exist within an authoritarian state and a male-dominated society.

The play tells the story of a number of oppressed women prisoners whose voices exhibit a diversity of ethics and aesthetics which can be interpreted under the lens of the theoretical implications and insights of Foucault. It comprises a dozen of major and minor characters who tell of their past memories in jail and the suffocating conditions under which they lived in the household, as well as their hopes for self-realization according to their internal logic though most of these characters are illiterate, lacking recognition of their rights or even the social and political surrounding milieu. The household, the street, and the prison are shown to be containers of power dynamics and punitive forms that trigger off resistance against strict social or political disciplines and modes of knowledge and truth. In actuality, the prison is theatrically contextualized to be a medium for self-expression in confrontation

with an oppressive state and a hegemonic masculinity. Manar Khalid maintains that “the prison space is considered the central hero of the play..., as it represents the prison as a physical space and as an institution that seeks to achieve reform and rehabilitation” (1)¹.

Technically, the use of polyphonic voices in the play touches upon Mikhail Bakhtin’s argument that the dialogic parts give characters an opportunity to be “a carrier of a fully valid word and not the mute” (93), a strategy employed by al-Assal to underscore a collective mode of self-representation and resistance. Besides, the use of interior monologues throughout the play serves as a medium for empathy whenever each of these women divulges her life story and her inner suffering respectively. These monologues help characters to define themselves in relation to the surrounding institutions which prove to be oppressive and suffocating. Maggie Awadalla holds that the circular structure of the play is intended by al-Assal to expose a “reality” that “can no longer be presented as a whole entity but becomes fragmented” (44). The fragmented structure thus reflects the characters’ fragmentation and disintegration and brings about a strong feeling of empathy towards them. In one of their illuminating comments on the structure of the play, Nehad Selaiha and Sara Enany argue that “the structure does not take the form of linear plot progression toward a climax...but proceeds...through calculated interruptions, digressions, and the accumulation of fragments that ultimately make up the whole and create a strong impact” (634). Moreover, the frame of the play contextualizes the degrading institutional frame in which these women exist, a frame which acts as a dehumanizing catalyst in the power-institution equation.

Foucault highlights the affinity between power-punishment relations and institutions in a way which validates that institutions are the containers of power which “invests itself in institutions, becomes embodied in techniques...in what ways punishment and the power of punishment are effectively embodied in a certain number of local, regional, material institutions, which are concerned with

¹ Quotes from Manar Khalid’s article are my translation.

torture or imprisonment, and to place these in the climate” (Foucault, “Lecture” 34-35). He views that power and punishment take root in institutions and the disciplines which constitute them. In this context, *The Women’s Prison* investigates how the juxtaposition between oppressive husbands and the oppressive state kill the potential human being inside women characters as if they were animals. Meanwhile, the oppressed women appear to have an obsessive desire to vindicate their identities within a dominant patriarchal and authoritarian institutionalization through resisting strict social and political disciplines by which institutions are encapsulated.

In a similar vein, Foucault rightly argues that mechanics of power hinge mainly upon “the existence of a whole set of techniques and institutions for measuring, supervising and correcting the abnormal” because such mechanisms of power divide human beings into two categories: the normal and the abnormal (Foucault, *Discipline & Punish* 199). Consequently, the social, executive, and juridical apparatuses in *The Women’s Prison* regard women prisoners as abnormal citizens and hence build up a Foucauldian edifice of power and punishment to coerce and subjugate them. Despite this, however, these women usually dismantle the disciplines of power and punishment through moving through the black holes existing between these apparatuses. In this sense, Foucault sees that power can be disseminated and deconstructed by the representatives of power because of the “internal conflicts of responsibility...which each authority found itself defending” and accordingly the condemned man can easily find “innumerable loopholes” to free himself from the austere course of power (79). Foucault labels this dynamic as the “badly regulated distribution of power” or the “dysfunction of power” (80).

Following Foucault, the prison in which these women exist is a panorama that reflects other forms of “prisonization” outside the prison, whether it is the household, the street, or even the state itself. The prison serves as a “web of panoptic techniques” which, argues Foucault, illustrates the ability of “panopticism” to produce new forms of knowledge and disciplines which can be used by the

powerful to punish, oppress, and objectify the powerless (224). More usually in a male-dominated society, the powerless women of the play are subject to a process of entire “prisonization” which gives birth to a process of objectification respectively. It is not surprising thus that Foucault explains that the apparatus of the prison encompasses “the notions of institutions of repression, rejection, exclusion, marginalization” (308). Therefore, he anatomizes the prison in the sense that it is “an instrument and vector of power” (30), and he diagnoses imprisonment as “semi-liberty or conditional liberty” (21).

By the same token, Foucault associates imprisonment and punishment with the notion of danger. He sets forth the following question: “Does the convicted person represent a danger to society?” (21) By this question, he casts doubt on the necessity of the penalty, its truthfulness and effectiveness. Demonstrations and public practices are not allowed by the state because, argues Foucault, they encompass “a political fear of the effects of these ambiguous rituals” (65). However, the political activists in *The Women’s Prison* represent no danger to those in power except in the sense that they will jeopardize their power if they are left with unconditional liberty. Nevertheless, they are severely punished, but their punishment, in Foucauldian terms, is a means which has its “tactics of power” (23), since it no longer depends on torture but rather on the loss of rights and liberty. Herein, punishment strikes the soul of the convicted person rather than his body as it “acts in depth to the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations” (16). Foucault argues: “The body as the major target of penal repression disappeared” because in punishment the body is a mere instrument “in order to deprive the individual of liberty that is regarded both as a right and as property” (8-11). Punishment resulting from power dynamics filtrates itself as an object of knowledge into the collective consciousness and makes the convicted person “an object of pity” (9), or as Foucault points it out: “Power produces knowledge...that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that is there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge” (27).

Furthermore, Foucault directs a scathing satire against execution as a punishment because it incorporates an underground political power associated with power dynamics adopted by the state, or as he puts it: “Execution is to be understood not only as a judicial, but also as a political ritual. It belongs...to the ceremonies by which power is manifested” (47). Above all, the resistance of political activists throughout the play reflects upon Foucault’s argument that rebellion is the direct repercussion of the tyranny of the authoritarian state: “Tyranny confronts rebellion; each calls forth the other” (74). It is within these Foucauldian ideologies of power, punishment, discipline, and resistance that this study is contextualized.

Power and Punishment

The opening scene of *The Women’s Prison* remarkably draws a parallel between a man abusing his wife in the household and a police force oppressing demonstrators in the street: Leila’s oppression by her husband in the household is the objective correlative of the oppression of demonstrators by the Egyptian riot police in the street. Robert Connell underscores the nexus between power and gender relations by calling this nexus “the central institutionalization of gendered power” and by arguing that “gender dynamics are a major force constructing the state” (Connell 519). From this angle, the multi-layered forms of power can best be understood from Leila’s argument that “the strong rule the weak” (al-Assal, *The Women’s Prison* 16)¹. By the same token, the first scene of the play scandalizes the brutality of statist power against a political activist called Salwa who works as a journalist advocating equality, justice, and freedom and that’s why she has been arrested more than once for her political activism. When she first appears, she is shown to be chased by the riot police, and it soon becomes clear that she was one of the demonstrators in the street. Having safely reached her apartment, she opens the window to hear “*the sound of firecrackers emanating from the street...The riot police besieges the demonstrators*” (13). Over the phone, Kamal, Salwa’s

¹ Quotes from *The Women’s Prison* are my translation.

husband who works as a university professor and political activist, asks her to burn everything that might prove their involvement in political activism: “Sweep the house and be careful not to miss anything” because the secret police might “arrive at any moment” (14). Rushing to follow her husband’s advice, the stage direction tells us that Salwa “*has taken out leaflets from inside the antiques*” (15). From a Foucauldian point of view, Kamal’s advice to his wife can best be seen as the spontaneous response springing from his awareness of the lack of “secrecy and autonomy” associated with the power of the state to punish dissenters (Foucault, *Discipline & Punish* 129). Put another way, Kamal’s assertion to his wife to do away with every piece of evidence which might condemn them is reminiscent of Foucault’s argument that “each piece of evidence aroused a particular degree of abomination” (42).

Critically, the demonstrations and marches organized by political activists and dissenters against the state bring to mind the Foucauldian view that such practices act for the verification of the power of the sovereign who represents the state even if they also act for some kind of power for the demonstrators or marchers, or as Foucault points it out: “In calling on the crowd to manifest its power, the sovereign tolerated for a moment acts of violence, which he accepted as a sign of allegiance, but which were strictly limited by the sovereign’s own privileges” (59). This view is quite verified by the police officer entrusted with arresting Salwa and her friend Leila when he asserts that all demonstrators in the street have been photographed by the secret police. In a sense, a citizen has the privilege to take part in demonstrations and meanwhile the state has the privilege to photograph him or her and use such evidence to punish them. The officer’s declaration above is in conformity with Foucault’s insight on the role of surveillance to maintain power over citizens: “Each street is placed under the authority of a syndic, who keeps it under surveillance....The gaze is alert everywhere” (195). This is reminiscent of the Orwellian outlook on totalitarianism in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in which he writes: “There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched

at any given moment” (2). In this context, Foucault touches a raw nerve when he argues:

Disciplinary power...is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them. It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection. (Foucault, *Discipline & Punish* 187)

Unlike Salwa who resists police violations against innocent citizens, Leila, while being arrested by the police, appears to be terrified by the officer's claim that she has been photographed by the secret police. The stage direction depicts Salwa's and Leila's reactions in a way which envisages Salwa's rejection of absolute power and Leila's ignominious surrender: "*Salwa almost loses her poise in front of the large number of secret police and sergeants, but she maintains control of herself*"; Leila "*is frozen in her place with fear*" (24). The officer's prideful declaration adverts to the state's authoritarian domination over all institutions, including the street itself, or as he threatens Leila: "We already have secret agents everywhere, and we already know all information about you from A to Z" (31). This recalls Foucault's insightful comment on the role of surveillance in maintaining power: "Surveillance is based on a system of permanent registration reports from the syndics to the intendants, from the intendants to the magistrates or mayor" (Foucault, *Discipline & Punish* 196). This is, however, what Foucault calls "panopticism": the state as a whole turns out to be a wide-open prison. It is not surprising thus that he satirizes the state as a "panoptic machine" (207).

By extension, the officer insists on arresting Leila despite Salwa's attempts to convince him that she has never been involved in political activities or even marches or demonstrations against the state. The stage direction depicts the impact of the statist power

dynamics on innocent citizens as follows: “*Leila fell to the ground, fainted*” (32). On the one hand, Leila’s defeatist attitude towards her arrest conjures up Gilles Deleuze’s argument that power “passes through the hands of the mastered no less than through the hands of the masters” (71). On the other hand, the detention of both Salwa and Leila touches upon Foucault’s implication that detention introduces “procedures of domination characteristic of a particular type of power” because it encompasses forms of “deprivation of liberty” (Foucault, *Discipline & Punish* 231-32).

The absolute power of the state is often used synonymous with the absolute power of the patriarch as though each power calls forth the other. Before her arrest, Leila has taken shelter to Salwa’s apartment to free herself from the oppressive domination of her husband Selim in the household. When Salwa asks her about the reason behind her painful aching, she replies: “I was deadly beaten....There’re no parts of my body left intact....He has shattered me....Trusting men is like trusting water in a sieve” (17-18). In this sense, Selaiha and Enany rightly argue that *The Women’s Prison* satirizes “such taboo subjects as female sexuality, the psychological trauma and disastrous long-term effects of female genital mutilation, legitimized rape within marriage and wife beating” (632). Theatrically, while Salwa and Leila are discussing the brutality of wife beating, “*the sound of firecrackers grows louder. Leila shivers in horror*” (18). Salwa explains that such a frightening sound emanates from tear gas canisters used by the police to disperse demonstrators in the street. The side effects of patriarchal power unfold themselves most clearly when Leila cries out in melancholic despair: “Uh, my broken wing” (20). In a symbolic move, Leila compares her powerlessness to that of demonstrators:

Leila: They’re like me, sister. I, too, screamed at him and said: ‘it’s haram, haram to do that. I live with you through thick and thin.’ He asks me to go right and I reply ‘ok’; he asks me to go left and I reply ‘amen’, and after all, look Salwa, look, what does that despotic, ruthless husband do?

[Leila rolls up the sleeve of her dress to show up the bruises on her body] (19)

Like the demonstrators', Leila's powerlessness is validated by the patriarchal power of her husband which is tantamount to a state of slavery. The playwright metaphorically draws up the notion of the "household" in terms of the notion of "prisonization". Leila tells Salwa that when she gives voice to her fury against her husband's violations after discovering that he has a co-wife, he approaches her like a monster: "When I told him that I had known he had a co-wife, he attacked me like a wild monster, pulled me by my hair, beat me almost to death, tore me apart, and eventually imprisoned me all night long...till I broke the lock of the door with a hammer and rushed out to you" (23). Obviously, the masculine power structures exercised by Selim against his wife Leila mirror the social aspect of the statist political power structures against demonstrators and political activists. For instance, when the police officer takes a glimpse of Leila's torn sleeve while he is searching Salwa's apartment, "*he was contemplating Leila's torn sleeve curiously and admiringly*" (26). From a Foucauldian perspective, the officer's admiration of patriarchal punishment and oppression is an affirmation from state representatives on the significance of power structures in the household, for it represents a social firewall against resistance, a firewall which precedes the political firewall built up and guarded by the state. The officer's curiosity about and admiration of Leila's beating by her husband hint at his deviation from his being an officer on duty to his being an admirer of women's subjugation by the masculine power structures.

More specifically, Selim tries to coerce his wife Leila to keep herself away from political activists because they, in his eyes, represent a thorn in the flesh of the state. Selim's power as a husband incorporates itself into the power of the state, or as he puts it: "Keep yourself away from people whose minds are fraught with fleas. Beware. They are saboteurs and enemies of the state" (118-19). He further compares his masculine power to God's power when he tells her that "submission to husband is like submission to God"

(118). In Foucauldian terms, Selim's description of political activists as "fleas" can best be interpreted as a process of objectification. This description represents a social punishment issued by an ordinary man as though the convicted person becomes an enemy to all, or as Foucault explains it: "The criminal designated as the enemy of all, whom it is in the interest of all to track down, falls outside the pact, disqualifies himself as a citizen...; he appears as a villain, a monster, a madman, perhaps, sick and, before long, 'abnormal' individual" (Foucault, *Discipline & Punish* 101).

Additionally, the close of Scene II, Act II, is illustrative of the dynamics of power and punishment within marriage. It takes the form of a nightmarish negative flashback in which Leila is traumatized by a night when her husband forces her to have sex with him: "*We hear Leila screaming as a slaughtered animal; she has put a sheet in her mouth so that her cries cannot be heard*" (146). The husband's sexual assault is theatrically deconstructed by al-Assal when she draws up a conversation between Leila and Salwa in which the former asks the latter if she has ever unwillingly had sex with her husband. Salwa's reply is intended to dismantle the oppressive power structures within marriage: "A moment of love is one of the sweetest moments in life; it must be lived with utmost sincerity and warmth from both parties, otherwise it's very terrible" (151). Leila's traumatization in this regard recalls Foucault's rejection of the disciplined bodies within marriage: "The body is invested with relations of power and domination...Power relations have an immediate hold upon" the body; "they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (25).

The negative consequences of masculine power structures come into full play when Leila flies into rage after Mona's release. Accordingly, Salwa angrily tells her that she lacks the spirit of challenge and accuses her of ignorance and subalternity. The description of Leila as a subaltern brings to mind Gayatri Spivak's insight on the inferior position of the subaltern who is never given a chance to speak: "There is no un-representable subaltern subject that

can know and speak” (285). In Spivakian terms, the female becomes a subaltern due to the presence of an omnipotent male who never gives her a chance to speak ; therefore, her voice has been rendered silent. This view is in conformity with Edward Said’s logic that there is an ideological function behind subalternity: to keep the “subordinate subordinate, the inferior inferior” (80). Under such a prism, Salwa reproaches Leila to push her into self-assessment, a strategy often used to awaken the sense of powerfulness in a defeated individual:

Salwa: Yes, you’re a subaltern and have no personality....You must come to your senses....You listen to your husband with no discussion or even thinking in what he says....He drives you to live haunted by the ghost of his own life, brainwashes you, and turns you into a human being who has no will. (158-59)

Thereupon, as the play comes to an end, Leila experiences a moment of illumination or epiphany to gain momentum and regain her powerfulness when she imaginatively speaks with her dead father telling him that she is nothing but “a parrot which repeats what it hears and has no freedom to say ‘no’” (168). In this imaginary conversation, she complains about her husband who wiped out her father’s noble teachings from her mind, so that she remains to play the role of a puppet in his hands. Due to this marked recognition, Leila takes off her wig, throw it away, and decidedly divorces her husband. Symbolically, Leila’s divorce to her husband to rid herself of the domestic power structures in the household seems to be reflexive of al-Assal’s divorce from her husband Abdallah Al-Toukhi. al-Assal once wrote, “Abdallah’s views on life and politics became the rule of my life to the point that sometimes I felt like I spoke with his tongue, I listened with his ears, and I saw with his eyes” (al-Assal, *Hug of Life: An Autobiography* 265)¹. It becomes clear thus that both al-Assal and her character Leila raise an

¹ Quotes from *Hug of Life: An Autobiography* are my translation.

eyebrow at the notion of the “household” as a patriarchal prison of “housewifization”.

Leila’s late recognition of her powerfulness is analogous to Shafikah’s. Throughout the play, Shafikah, one of the women prisoners, repeats a single utterance: “I’ve loved, befooled, killed, and then relaxed” (170). With the close of the play, the playwright decodes this enigmatic utterance through a conversation between Shafikah and Leila in which the former confesses to the latter that she killed her husband who broke her heart by taking himself a mistress that she saw him naked with her in her own bedroom. Shafikah furthers her argument when she tells Leila that the notion of “prisonization”, in her eyes, is synonymous with the notion of darkness emanating from the prison of marriage, or as she puts it: “This is not a prison. The real prison my darling is darkness into which a woman has to live; the real prison is the heartbreak, treachery of time, bewilderment, and oppression” (171). Thus, in one of her elaborate comments on the play, Manar Khalid argues: “The concept of prison is not limited to the boundary of the walls and the place known as prison, but it can also extend to include several concepts such as psychological entrapment or isolation and other stressful psychological feelings” (1). It becomes apparent thus that Shafikah, like Leila, is haunted by a moment of illumination or recognition which drives her to regain her powerfulness even if through a murder crime. On the one hand, Shafikah’s words hint at the Foucauldian view that punishment “leaves the domain of more or less everyday perception and enters that of abstract consciousness” whereby the individual becomes the judge of his practices (Foucault, *Discipline & Punish* 9). On the other hand, these words might be taken to be a searing indictment of the judicial system which espouses no objective mechanics such as “the knowledge of the criminal, one’s estimation of him, what is known about the relations between him, his past and his crime” (18).

Likewise, Adalat, one of the women prisoners, satirizes the judicial system. She is sentenced to die for killing her husband. Foucault argues that execution depicts “the all-powerful sovereign

who displays his strength” (49). Adalat’s final commentary on her crime touches upon Foucault’s argument that “the cries and sufferings of the condemned man serve as an ultimate proof at the end of the judicial ritual” (45). Being notified of the sentence, she imagines a debate with the judge over the sentence where she rationalizes her criminal behavior:

Adalat: What execution and why, Your Excellency?! I killed him once, but he killed me a hundred times. Since the day we married, he severely assaulted me....I endured his beating, humiliation, and vulgarity. I endured with him days as black as night and experienced the sense of bitterness....Now, on my way to death, I yearn for a different life, a paradise I’ve never lived. (172-73)

The truth divulged by Adalat as regards her husband’s murder is one implication of Foucault’s reasoning that “each death agony expresses a certain truth” (45). Her words can be taken to be a defense mechanism meant to alleviate the penalty in the afterlife as though she is addressing God for forgiveness because it is only He who really knows her motive for the crime: her husband’s traumatizing humiliation and incessant beating, and notably his incestuous sexual abuse of his stepson, who is Adalat’s child from a previous marriage. On the one hand, Adalat’s revolt against the death sentence, in Foucauldian terms, provides “the affirmation of [her] belated repentance...accepting the verdict, asking both God and man for forgiveness...through some process of purification” (67). On the other hand, these words represent a shelter for her in order not to fall into melancholic despair and meanwhile signify the goodness of the condemned and the error of the judge. Also, these words arouse the feelings of empathy from her fellow prisoners who can provide a spiritual shelter for her to build up a sanctuary of self-love, self-harmony, and self-satisfaction.

Above all, Adalat’s illusionary debate with the judge over the death sentence can be seen as a delusion, for it reflects on Foucault’s view that such a brutal sentence might drive the suspect into a

torrent of hallucinations or a touch of insanity. Foucault calls these symptoms the “disturbances around the scaffold” (68). From a different angle, the ethics and aesthetics around Adalat’s murder crime can be elaborated through her indulgence in moments of recognition reflecting her deliberate belief in the greatness of her crime. In this context, Foucault argues: “It is the discovery of the beauty and greatness of crime; in fact, it is the affirmation that greatness too has a right to crime” (68). Her confession, however, sheds light on Foucault’s reasoning that the function of execution is “to reveal the truth...It added to the conviction the signature of the convicted man” (44). Symbolically, Adalat’s outburst against the sentence, in Foucauldian terms, is “to demand...abolition” of the sentence (63).

From a socialist standpoint, *The Women’s Prison* exposes the decline of rural economy which drives peasant girls into prostitution and robbery, both of which are non-statist means of production when the state espouses capitalism as its mainstream in orientation. Throughout the play, poverty proves to be a medium for crime and hence punishment. Foucault challenges the logic of consumerism associated with the body, subjectivity, and identity. Living under declining material circumstances, Lawahiz takes robbery as an outlet away from abject poverty. She is jailed for robbery because she broke into a whorehouse to steal the gold of prostitutes. The portrayal of Lawahiz is intended by the playwright to scandalize the poverty-sexual honor dichotomy. Having been arrested in a whorehouse, Lawahiz hides the stolen gold in a secret place in the prison because it is the only evidence that will acquit her of prostitution in her husband’s eyes, otherwise he will divorce her if suspecting her chastity and sexual honor.

Similarly, Thawani’s father, being under bitter material circumstances, sells her to a man for 500 Egyptian pounds and she is then forced into prostitution. Judith Tucker rightly observes that “women’s lives—their access to power and economic resources as well as their social and legal standing—surely vary from one community or class to another” (Tucker viii). For example, when

Hend first appears in the play, she articulates the charge behind her imprisonment, screaming: “I was hungry and naked and couldn’t find a loaf of bread. I’ve never worked as a maid, but when my father fell ill, I was bitterly tormented by hunger. So I had to go out for work” (44). Charged with prostitution, she is put in jail, but she is haunted by self-condemnation that she used to spin like “a slaughtered chicken” (45). By analogy, the beginning of Scene IV, Act I, takes the form of a nightmare which envisages a debate between Leila and her husband Selim over the notion of power. For him, power is dependent on richness; he regards money as a monarch to whose decrees all must bend. Money, in his eyes, can make a man a huge whale so as not to be eaten up by others. Despite this, however, he insists on labeling his wife as a very small fish.

Moreover, Sanniyah tells Mona of her sense of bitterness out of being a mere sex object devoid of feelings and emotions. Her step-mother tries to convince her to secretly get married to a wealthy man as if she were a commodity, but she rejects and willingly falls into the abyss of prostitution in order to live on the fat of the land. When she tells Mona that she used to sell her body for money, Mona bitterly argues: “Very terrible, very terrible. Is it reasonable to sell your body to men with no feelings between you and them?!” (145) Sanniyah’s confession, therefore, contextualizes Foucault’s view that the material factors can constitute a disciplined body. He argues that the body can be constituted as “labour power...only if it is caught up in a system of subjection....The body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body” (26). In this context, Foucault throws piercing light on the affinity between crime, which is prostitution in Sanniyah’s case, and the economic conditions or what he calls “the operation of economic pressures” and the soaring rise in the standard of living which force the individual into crime in response to his obsessive need for money and security.

Discipline and Resistance

Significantly, the prison in *The Women's Prison* represents a medium for discipline and resistance. Some prisoners take the prison to be a medium for rebellion and resistance while others take it to be a medium for discipline and defeatism. The opening of the play is highly reflexive of such Manichean viewpoint. The play opens with a dance show performed by male and female dancers articulating resistance. The show is followed by a lyric articulating man's nostalgia for justice, equality, and freedom. While the first group of dancers enjoys their performance, another group approaches to attack them in a way articulating authoritarianism and domination. The scene ends with complete darkness. Act II also begins with a lyric show performed by a number of prisoners articulating man's oppression in the prison. Critically, the adversary reaction of the second group of dancers to oppress the first group conjures up Foucault's insight on the relationship between the prison and discipline. The volunteering prisoners who exercise power over their fellows appear to be integrated into the disciplines which constitute the prison apparatus, or as Foucault points it out:

The disciplines constitute nothing more than an infra-law. They seem to extend the general forms defined by law to the infinitesimal level of individual lives; or they appear as methods of training that enable individuals to become integrated into these general demands. They seem to constitute the same type of law on a different scale, thereby make it more meticulous and more indulgent. (Foucault, *Discipline & Punish* 222)

Discipline in prison is quite apparent through the portrayal of numerous characters. When Leila is first put in jail, she asks Ansaf, a name meant by the playwright to indicate 'justice': "Is it possible that one remains in jail while one is innocent?" Ansaf replies: "We all are under injustice" (42). In response to Ansaf's argument, Leila hysterically cries out in despair: "No, no, I couldn't stay here. I must get out of prison." (42). These words can best be regarded as

signifiers of man's unwillingness and inability to conform to strict disciplines in the prison. Objecting to enter the cell, Leila is relieved by Salwa who tries to convince her that their imprisonment is out of their will, but rather it is the brutal upper-hand of the authoritarian state: "Leila, your imprisonment now is not in my hand or even yours, but they're the conditions which you must endure" (54). In rejection of this traumatizing claim, Leila replies: "I can't, I can't" (54). However, Salwa traumatizes her most when she argues, "Leila, we're in a prison, not a hotel, and you must confront the status quo" (55). From a Foucauldian point of view, Leila's horror of solitary confinement represents rejection of invisibility and the lack of communication. In one of his elaborate insights on the role of discipline in the prison, Foucault argues that the spatial containers of power such as the prison are designed to be a source of invisibility because such invisibility is a guarantee of discipline: "Each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions. He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (200).

Likewise, the negative impact of discipline in the prison is depicted through the portrayal of Adalat. When she first appears, the stage direction tells us that her hair is agog with bugs, and when Ansaf asks her why she does not debug her hair, she replies that it is worth nothing as she is expecting a death sentence or at least prison for life. Like Adalat, Shafikah is another example of one's defeatism if one is subject to strict disciplines. She proves to be acquainted with the notion of "prisonization" to the degree that she regards the prison as a shelter. When Salwa asks her if she is still under custody over those long years, she desperately replies: "I had been sentenced to remain in prison for life. The prison is my inevitable lodging and shelter. So I had left the outside world behind" (57). From a Foucauldian standpoint, the death sentence some prisoners are expecting invokes "the rule of lateral effects" proposed by Foucault to indicate that such punishment has a traumatic effect not only on the convicted person but also on those who have not committed the

crime so that those in power can impose a discipline whereby they can make sure that the crime will not be repeated (95). Foucault asserts that the brutality of death sentence as a discipline lies in the truth that it deprives the individual “of the right to exist” (13), thereby shattering the discipline of existence itself. Hence, Shafikah falls into a state of nihilism that she sees that her life is not worth living to the degree that she has willingly left the outside world behind and thrown all the pleasures of life into instant oblivion.

Discipline is also manifest through the malpractices of a woman prisoner called Elham who forces other prisoners to serve her in humiliation. She once orders a prisoner called Kamilia: “Cut my big toenail and clean it very well” (125). Added to this, when Sanniyah takes to singing in order to set up a euphoric space for herself in the prison, Elham orders Kamilia to render her speechless, and Kamilia furthers the wish to impose discipline by telling Sanniyah that her “voice looks like the sound of a donkey” (125). Kamilia unfolds her ignominious surrender to discipline when she compares Sanniyah to “a goat” (126). Elham’s ill-treatment with other prisoners and her merciless attempts to dehumanize and animalize them are highly indicative of Foucault’s implication that disciplines rampant in the prison can turn the individual into “a wild fragment of nature” (101).

Conversely, Mona, a political activist who is jailed for taking part in a demonstration against the soaring prices, proves to be a prisoner resisting strict disciplines due to her liberal ideologies. She always appears to be constructing a project of the self within an ontology of becoming. Being liberally oriented, Mona once declares: “Nobody is liable to injustice unless willingly” (64). Besides, she directs a biting satire against Salwa, a journalist advocating women’s rights and resisting male chauvinism, when she plainly tells her that what really matters is not the woman question, but rather the question of society as a whole. Her liberalism comes into full play when she tells Salwa: “But there’re many men who live under oppression, fatigue, and injustice” (63). Interestingly, her first appearance in the play takes the form of a quarrel with a prisoner because the latter tells her that it is forbidden to take books or paper into the prison according to the

directives of the prison's governor. In response to such poignant argument which encapsulates conformism to discipline, Mona asks the prisoner to show her the prison bylaw to know what is forbidden and what is allowed for her as a prisoner and threatens that she will start a hunger strike if her request has not been taken into consideration. Mona's resistance against the strictly disciplined bylaw can best be seen as a manifestation of the Foucauldian notion of the "continual supervision", a discipline in the prison which might strike or arouse "perpetual disorder" (57) as a resistance mechanism.

Furthermore, Mona's advice to her fellow prisoners to sing the folkloric lyric "Good morning to the roses blossoming in the gardens of Egypt" illustrates her deliberate belief in the significance of resistance even if one is into custody or even under strict disciplines (98). It is not surprising thus that she quotes lines from the Turkish poet Nazim Hekmet which read: "The most beautiful days in our lives we haven't lived yet/ The most beautiful roses in the world haven't grown yet/ The most beautiful kids in the world haven't been born yet" (152). In a symbolic move, Mona tells other prisoners that Hekmet wrote that poem while he was in jail due to his involvement in political activism.

More significantly, Mona resists motherhood when it is used synonymous with discipline. This is made clear through Salwa's ill-treatment with her daughter Huda, a university student at the Faculty of Arts, Cairo University. In one of her talks with Mona in the prison, Salwa reminisces that day when she received an anonymous phone call informing her that her daughter was spending time with a young man called Hisham in his apartment. When Mona asks her about her reaction towards her daughter's behavior, Salwa replies: "Of course I felt I had to beat her and kill her, too." (131). Herein, Mona boldly informs her that she has failed to take up the organic burden of care as a mother but rather tries to forcibly impose discipline over her daughter's life. Therefore, she casts doubt on Salwa's so-called liberalism and accuses her of schizophrenia: "Let me tell you lady that you live a strange contradiction. You are a progressive woman who fights for the nation and yet you live a

flagrant contradiction. Are you a liberated woman, really? Don't you still see Huda as just a girl whose hymn you must worry about?" (132). As a result, Salwa bursts into tears, but Mona tries to raise her spirits by telling her that she herself suffers from the lack of unconditional care. Mona hits the nail on the head when she affirms that motherhood should be a container of shelter and love rather than discipline: "Believe me, Madame Salwa, we need you as mothers, but we need you as one integrated personality, not a split one" (133).

Like Mona, Khokhah, one of the women prisoners, represents a beacon of hope for other prisoners in an attempt to deconstruct disciplinary structures of the prison. Being a drug dealer, she is into custody for life. Her resistance against discipline unfolds itself most clearly when she tells Salwa: "I greatly respect political activists because they are brave women; henceforth, I'm in charge of all your needs" (85). Her resistance is manifest through her ability to provide political activists with paper, pens, and newspapers in spite of the strict discipline of the prison which prohibits such practices. She also appears to be a spring of spiritual power. When Lawahiz is to leave the prison by virtue of a release statement, she asks her to go to one of her apprentices to send her hazelnut, almond and candied so as to make a party for Ansaf's newborn whom she delivers in the prison. In Foucauldian terms, Khokhah's insistence on making a party for Ansaf's newborn can be interpreted as a defense mechanism to dismantle the panoptic discipline of the prison which aims at "breaking communications" (209). It can also be regarded as gunpowder by which the prisoners can blow up the invincibility of disciplines existing in the prison. Indeed, the solidarity among the prisoners while they are celebrating the newborn acts as a jump over the sovereign and the disciplinary repression.

The birth of a newborn in the prison must not go unexamined. With the close of Scene III, Act I, the women prisoners empathetically help Ansaf in her childbirth. The playwright ends the scene with a visual image of "*a newborn screaming louder and louder in the silence of the night*" (71). This image, on the one hand, represents a hope for salvation or the birth of a new beginning. The

close of the scene takes the form of a cry of a newborn which is symbolic of cleansing, freshness, rebirth, and healing. On the other hand, the newborn's cry can be taken to be an implication of change in state or environment, thereby reflecting the women's overwhelming desire to resist the disciplinary procedures under which they forcibly exist in the prison.

Nonetheless, Ansaf's newborn has been taken away from her in Act II by her husband by virtue of a court order after divorcing her. The scene in which the newborn has been taken away takes the form of a funeral as if it were a tree of hope being uprooted from one's heart: "*All women cry and pat Ansaf on the shoulder. Leila cries in muffled spasm. Salwa moves towards Ansaf and pats her shoulder. Mona is deeply touched and crying. Ansaf slaps her cheeks....Ansaf faints. All women circle around her and support her. Leila mumbles in disbelief*" (139-141). This scene touches upon Foucault's outlook on the ugliness of judicial disciplines, particularly when they strike the soul of the convicted person because such punishments can never be a source of pride or glory. Foucault labels such practice as a disciplinary procedure that is "taken to judging something other than crimes, namely, the 'soul' of the criminal" (19).

Moreover, the officer's portrayal is intended by the playwright to spark off resistance against the authoritarian disciplines of the state, which insists on oppressing innocent citizens and disappointing their expectations and hopes, thus throwing them into despair and hopelessness. Salwa's resistance against the police attack at her apartment in the dead of the night unfolds itself most clearly when she asks the police officer: "By which right do you attack people's houses like that?!" (24) She then asks him to show her the search warrant, but he replies that such warrants are mere formalities. Disappointed, Salwa asks him: "Do you call the law formalities?" (25) The officer's description of law as formalities is in close affinity with Foucault's notion of the "surplus power" possessed by the person in power to validate the "lack of power" of the suspect (29). The officer's reply, however, builds up power machinery which nurtures and reinforces what Foucault calls "a possible corpus of

knowledge” which is a prerequisite for the constitution of authoritarian disciplines (29). Foucault rightly argues that such domain of discipline shapes the psyche, personality, and consciousness of the condemned individual regardless of “the moral claims of humanism” (30). On the one hand, the officer’s portrayal demonstrates the function of absolute power to disappoint resistance and validate discipline. Being an executioner, he appears to have no scrupulous conscience, precisely proving himself as cog in the great machine of power run by the state, or as Foucault explains it: “The executioner acts as a cog between the prince and the people” (74). Therefore, the suspect can be described as “a stone for the State” (74). On the other hand, Salwa’s asking for a search warrant conjures up Foucault’s argument that truth-power relation is dialectically aligned with “resistance to police searches” (63). Remarkably, the officer’s malpractices and violations signify Foucault’s view that the executioner is delegated by the state to oppress resistance regardless of the ethics of justice as though he is entrusted with a mission to speak for justice in its entirety.

Above all, throughout *The Women’s Prison*, the statist newspapers serve as a mechanism to frustrate resistance and impose discipline. The newspapers circulate that political activists, demonstrators, and dissenters are traitors and accuse them of espionage. From a Foucauldian point of view, the dissemination of such accusations against political activists is intended by the state to smear them rapidly and widely to make sure that nobody will resist their disciplines or re-rebel against them. These newspapers help to brainwash the normal citizens on purpose. Foucault argues: “The condemned man must therefore circulate rapidly and widely; they must be accepted and redistributed by all; they must shape the discourse that each individual has with others and by which crime is forbidden to all by all—the true coin that is substituted in people’s minds for the false profits of crime” (108). This process acts as “a permanent recodification of the mind of the citizens” (130). The newspapers’ involvement in condemning resistance and rebellion is accounted for by Foucault as a tool of propaganda used by the state to turn black into white; in Foucault’s words: “The newspapers took

over the task of recounting the grey, unheroic details of everyday crime and punishment” (69). The playwright thus theatricalizes the disciplinary discrediting tactics of newspapers in a smear campaign by propounding negative propaganda about political activists.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, Fathia al-Assal’s *The Women’s Prison* displays ideologies and theoretical implications proposed by Michel Foucault on power, punishment, discipline, and resistance. The play charts the organization of the power to punish and the bodies that reinforce that power, whether they are political bodies represented by the authoritarian state or social bodies represented by oppressive husbands. The power to punish derives mainly from political or social authorities which take domination as its central pillar. The techniques of punishment comprise imprisonment, wife beating, humiliation, subjugation, and issuance of sentences by the court. The disciplined bodies of women are subject to torture due to lethal disciplines that tend to humiliate and dehumanize them in an authoritarian state and a male-dominated society. The state oppresses political activists in the street and the prison. Husbands oppress and humiliate their wives in the household. Besides, poverty proves to a medium for crime and hence punishment. Some women are forced into robbery and prostitution due to the declining material circumstances under which they bitterly exist and, in consequence, they are put in jail to confront humiliating power structures and punitive forms. Thus, the negative impacts of power and punishment remain manifest throughout the play.

By looking deep into the souls of women prisoners, it becomes obvious that they are bitterly tormented by the political, social power to punish and the oppressive disciplines which control their existence whether in the household, the street, or the prison. The mechanisms of discipline are meant to control citizens, all citizens, whether they are dissenters or normal citizens. The prison appears as a network spreading throughout society. Being into custody, these women openly contemplate their past life stories in an attempt to

deconstruct the diacritics of their plight and restructure modes of existence which can be a gateway towards self-defense, self-representation, and self-realization. Metaphorically, they are haunted by meditations on the sunrays and the color of sea waves being sources of liberation from the oppressive power structures and punitive forms adopted by either the state and or the patriarch. One of the prisoners tells her fellows that the air they breathe in is rotten. Leila, for example, is portrayed as a bird with a broken wing till she eventually experiences a moment of recognition and regains a half-opened box of self-realization by divorcing her husband whose masculine power calls forth the authoritarian power of the state.

The penal system represented by the prison is fraught with strict disciplines which aim to humiliate and dehumanize women prisoners. So, some women resist the process of dehumanization by their non-conformity to such disciplines to find an outlet towards articulation and self-harmony. The women prisoners are often described as insects, cockroaches or even goats, a process of animalization intended to deliver their attempt towards self-authentication meaningless. However, drawing on further insights from Foucault, the play depicts that power and punishment serve to frustrate resistance and rebellion of women political activists, liberalists, demonstrators, dissenters, and rebels through imposing strict social or political disciplines. Despite this, however, some prisoners, such as Mona and Khokhah, quite succeed in dismantling these disciplines to awaken the sense of fullness inside their fellows and to highlight the fact that the individual can be destroyed but not defeated.

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