

POLITICS OF THE (TEXTUAL) BODY: EMBODIED ISSUES OF GENDER AND POWER  
IN AIDOO'S *CHANGES: A LOVE STORY*, FAQIR'S *PILLARS OF SALT*, AND  
WINTERSON'S *WRITTEN ON THE BODY*

by

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This thesis explores the literary manifestation of patriarchal embodiment in several multicultural novels: Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*, Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*, and Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*. Using theories of embodiment, gender, and power, I analyze how the female body is cast as a surface onto which gendered power structures can be inscribed, as well as the ways in which the body subverts cultural gender norms. The novels exemplify the relationship among literature, culture, and consciousness and offer visions of feminism outside of a Western paradigm. [Trigger Warning: This thesis features instances of sexual violence that may be triggering to some readers.]



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## Introduction

### (Dis)Orienting Theories of Literature, Bodies, and Power

Certain cultural themes are expressed by rites of bodily manipulation... The rituals enact the form of social relations and in giving these relations visible expression they enable people to know their own society. The rituals work upon the body politic through the symbolic medium of the physical body.

-- Mary Douglas, 128

Modern feminist theory has sought to include the physical female body in ways that traditional feminisms have neglected, although the body has yet to become a fully integrated component of Western feminist discourse. The frequent lack of consideration for the physical female body has been referred to as “the blind-spot” in Western feminism, which tends to “ignore the body or [places] it in the position of being somehow subordinate to and dependent for all that it interesting about it on animating intentions, some sort of psychical or social significance” (Grosz 3). Aside from political and philosophical debates on the rights to the female body— including issues such as ownership and reproduction— Western waves of feminism have failed to acknowledge the physical female body as inseparable from the female psyche. According to Elizabeth Grosz, “feminism has uncritically adopted many physiological assumptions regarding the role of the body in social, political, cultural, psychical, and sexual life and...can be regarded as complicit in the misogyny that characterizes Western reason” (3). In this way, feminist theory’s failure to acknowledge the complex state of female existence beyond the mind/body dichotomy has largely contributed to the subjugation of women. To exemplify this, during the second wave of American feminism, spanning from the 1960’s to 1990’s, women’s right to their own bodies was at the forefront of social conflict, but the conversation fell short of discussing the female mind and body as a single entity. The debate addressed the rights to the female body, but failed to conceptualize the complexity of women’s corporeal

experiences. Consequently, numerous conflicts over women's relationship with their bodies remain unresolved in current feminist discourse. In response to this blind-spot in Western feminist thought, Judith Butler suggests that "perhaps the most important task is to think through the debates on the body, since it may or may not be true that cultural construction effaces both sexual difference and bodily process" (*Undoing Gender* 202). The conversation addressing the phenomenological orientation of gendered bodies has been marginalized within traditional feminist theory and must be engaged before the mind/body dichotomization can be overcome.

One of the most notable Western scholars who has avoided dichotomizing the mind and body is Thomas Csordas, whose theories on embodiment are essential to and apparent throughout my thesis. Csordas postulates that "the body is not an object to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the subject of culture, or in other words as the existential ground of culture" (5). Individuals experience the world through their bodies, thus becoming an embodied reflection of the cultural systems that constantly interact around them. With consideration of this, our thinking has a direct effect upon the physical body: what we experience psychologically, we also experience physically. In this way, the body becomes an artifact of culture, again mirroring literature's role as a medium for expression, deviation, and consciousness.

Like the physical human body, literature serves as a site for expression: a medium through which writers construe both personal and cultural truths. In this way, literature presents a tantalizing dilemma converging consciousness, fiction, and reality. Literary scholars have long debated the relationship of literature to cognition and the extent to which literature encompasses the human experience. For the purposes of this thesis, literature's primary function is to place abstract cultural ideologies into a personal context, thus becoming experiential for readers.

Literature is a space and medium of deviation, intimating experiences outside of one's self. Accordingly, literature becomes a cognitive tool that is both a representation of human processes and a means by which readers may become phenomenologically disoriented. This thesis seeks to disrupt understandings of text, gendered bodies, and power in its application of embodiment to traditional methods of literary analysis.

Although it is admittedly unconventional to examine embodiment within a literary context, I posit that this approach provides a means of reading narrative that transcends the text itself and implores readers to consider cultural situations. The purpose of this analytical method is to examine the role of literature as an artifact of culture and to reveal real-life ethnography and consciousness within the text. In examining the cultural situation of each text, I also bring into question the relationship of the author to his or her writing and the extent to which writers convey their own experiences through textual media. The influence of cultural rhetorics in examining texts diverges from traditional methods of literary analysis that often place the text in isolation. In contrast, my textual analysis stems from a consideration of the cultures within which each novel is situated.

The novels that this thesis analyzes originate from and are based in three distinctive settings: Jordan, Britain, and Ghana. At the heart of each of these works, however, is a patriarchal social order that drives the novels' conflicts and characters. Additionally, the settings of Jordan and Ghana maintain the complexity of post-colonialism, which functions alongside patriarchy to determine gendered and racialized power dynamics. Although there is indubitably a separation between fictional text and ethnography, it is difficult to refute that the systems of power within a particular cultural setting and background do not, to some extent, influence the

content of each novel. Considering this, the novels become a reflection of the patriarchal social order embraced by their respective cultural communities.

Individuals living within a patriarchal system are confined to constricted gender roles within their societies, limiting them to positions narrowly designated as male or female.

Patriarchy features an underlying bias toward traditionally male roles, leaving women with limited power in most instances. It also disempowers men by placing them within a narrow understanding of masculinity, characterized by the assertion of power over others, sometimes leading to physical violence and aggressive behavior. Gendered power dynamics are a driving force in the texts that this thesis brings to analysis, specifically through the practices of masculinity and patriarchy that are used to oppress the female body. Although there is much existing discussion of gender's role within each of the chosen texts, the conversation is lacking a thorough analysis of physical, gendered bodies and their effects on characters' power and autonomy. Within each chapter, I will demonstrate how instances of forced bodily oppression in the individual novels exemplify a gendered power hierarchy.

My thesis furthers the conversation on text, embodiment, and feminism by suggesting that we consider the mind and body as inseparable, thereby situating the novels' characters as being not only psychologically and intellectually oppressed, as suggested by traditional feminist theorists, but also physically oppressed through the process of cultural embodiment. Through the novels' patriarchal settings, gendered hierarchies of power are inscribed onto characters' physical bodies.

This thesis seeks to fill a conversational void in feminist theory by examining the relationship between the oppressed body and mind within a patriarchal culture. Theories of embodiment contribute to my argument through their consideration of culture's physical

manifestation in and on the body. The characters in each novel that I bring to analysis are not only oppressed by the patriarchal or postcolonial societies in which they live, but they are also subjugated physically by other gendered and racialized bodies. Instances of rape<sup>1</sup>, imprisonment, disease, and violence mark the ways in which the body becomes as much a victim to internalized cultural norms as the mind. Sara Ahmed attests that “bodies take the shape of norms that are repeated over time with force. Through repeating some gestures and not others, or through being oriented in some directions and not others, bodies become contorted: they get twisted into shapes that enable some action only insofar as they restrict the capacity for other kinds of action” (91). For both fictional characters and real individuals, continued exposure to patriarchal norms results in physical actions taken upon the body that reinforce gender roles and eliminate the ability for the body to perform action outside of social expectations. Due to the patriarchal and/or postcolonial settings of each novel, the characters are unable to actualize identities outside of restrictive social parameters, illustrating the effect of embodied cultural norms. Theories of cultural embodiment are applied within my thesis as it transcends the text as a simple narrative and acknowledges the ways in which feminist and postcolonial settings are inscribed onto characters’ physical bodies.

Cultural embodiment explores the ways in which bodies become a physical reflection of values, beliefs, and communities. Throughout history, theories of embodiment have evolved drastically and hold a wide spectrum of views on objects, meaning, and perception. As within feminist discourse, traditional Western theories of embodiment suggest that the mind exists separately from the body, dichotomizing the human experience to physical and psychological events. If we regard the individual’s mind and body as a singular entity, however, the human

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<sup>1</sup> Trigger Warning: This thesis features instances of sexual violence that may be triggering to some readers.

experience becomes multifaceted and oppression reveals itself not only as a psychological state, but also as a physical barrier. My thesis applies theories of embodiment that seek to overcome the Western paradigm and regard the two existential components of mind and body as indivisible.

## Chapter One

### Embodied Expectations in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*

One of the most pivotal issues in Ama Ata Aidoo's novel, *Changes: A Love Story*, is its female characters' struggle with actualizing identity outside of cultural gender norms. Within the first pages of the novel, the right to self-identify and control one's own body is brought into conflict and continues as a theme throughout the book. Within patriarchal Ghanaian society, controversy exists over the rights to the female body. The male-biased power structures determine that women exist to fulfill the subservient roles of wife and mother, but substantial resistance to this ideology of male domination is apparent not only within the text, but also in actual Ghanaian culture. In the past several decades, there has been a marked shift in Ghanaian culture that has brought traditional patriarchal values into question. During this movement, numerous Ghanaians have asserted that equity and individuals' rights to the body cannot truly be achieved under the influences of patriarchal oppression. Aidoo's novel mirrors the women's movement of Ghana by exploring the various gender roles fulfilled by women and how they are inscribed onto the physical female body. Through issues of rape, marriage, and sex, the novel's central characters experience various forms of oppression in their pursuit of a female identity. In *Changes*, the characters' experiences negotiate personal responsibility for one's own body and challenge the notion of a singular female identity.

In Aidoo's novel, the physical body is as much victim to patriarchal ideals as the mind. Both are compromised by a social order that favors male masculinities and attempts to disempower women. Characters' embodiment of patriarchal subjugation becomes a catalyst for

conflict throughout Aidoo's novel, as Ghana's social power dynamics contribute to the novel's progression and the oppression faced by its characters.

Since Ghana attained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1957, its culture has undergone drastic changes as a result of the search for a post-colonial identity. Marital and familial traditions, in particular, have been eroded in favor of more modern or Western customs. According to Ginette Curry, "familial changes, especially in urban areas, have been triggered by several factors such as Ghanaian women's increased level of education resulting in more social and spatial mobility, the disintegration of the lineage systems because of migration, as well as a reduced family size" (182). By rejecting the traditional role of the female, familial structures have been adapted to allow for women's mobility. This cultural evolution has, in turn, triggered changes in the ways husbands, wives, and families interact with one another and embody expected gender roles. Aidoo explains that she seeks to capture these social dynamics of Accra society in writing *Changes*: "The different voices [in the novel] represent different sorts of possibilities for different women in the society. The situation is volatile and at root I see it as slightly more honest for me to lay out different positions without pulling everything together" (George 302). In this way, Aidoo's novel is constructed so as to not mislead the reader into a final conclusion or answer to Ghanaian social issues, but rather replicate the tumult that she perceives in Accra society. The fictional novel serves as an artifact of its greater culture and a means by which to raise consciousness of systemic power issues.

The patriarchal social order of Ghana directly mirrors the domination experienced during its period of colonization, although it is not a direct result of colonial oppression. The rigid gender hierarchy pre-existed the British occupation, but was intensified by the disorder stemming from Ghana's emancipation, as well as the subsequent pursuit of a new social order.

As individuals seek to establish new identities within a postcolonial environment, the climate of uncertainty enables the embodiment of gendered power hierarchies. In this way, Ghana transformed from a society plagued by imperialism into a patriarchal culture in which women became the primary objects for oppression. Although Aidoo's novel is a fictionalization of Ghanaian society, it is difficult to refute that the country's search for postcolonial identity, especially in terms of challenged gender roles, is pervasive throughout the novel in the oppression of the physical female body.

*Changes* tells the story of Esi, a self-empowered, strong-willed statistician with a Master's degree, employed in a lucrative job at the Department of Urban Statistics. She is unhappily married to her husband, Oko, with whom she has a young daughter. Esi and Oko often dispute over their assumed gender roles within the relationship, such as Esi's refusal to cook for the family or bear any more children. During one argument, Oko rapes his wife in an angry fit. The assault leaves Esi devastated and isolated from friends and family, as marital rape is not a widely accepted concept within her culture. Although marital rape does occur, the patriarchal culture does not recognize the act as violent, but rather as a husband's right. After divorcing Oko, Esi enters a polygamous marriage with a charismatic travel agent, Ali. Ali's first wife Fusena accepts Esi as second wife, but reveals her jealousy when she learns that Esi holds a university degree and a career: an ambition that Fusena had held prior to marrying Ali. Fusena feels betrayed by Ali in that he had insisted that she abandon her dreams of becoming a teacher to better fulfill her duties as wife at home. It is not long before Ali abandons Esi completely, leaving Esi unsatisfied in this marriage as well.

The novel also discusses Opokuya, Esi's dear friend who occupies a more feminine role as a nurturing mother, nurse, and midwife. Like Esi, Opokuya has created a career for herself,

but manages to also fulfill cultural expectations of a woman as a subservient wife. Every morning, Opokuya and her husband, Kubi, argue over the use of the car: a dispute that nearly always ends with Opokuya's defeat. Although Opokuya frequently relents to her husband during this common argument, she describes the matter as "one of the few areas of friction in their otherwise good marriage," suggesting that she experiences contentment in other aspects of her relationship with Kubi (Aidoo 17).

From the beginning of *Changes*, Aidoo brings the issue of embodied patriarchy to the forefront of the novel, a theme that is apparent throughout the story's entirety. Within the first pages of the novel, the author constructs this vivid scene of marital rape for readers:

Oko flung the bed cloth away from him, sat up, pulled her down, and moved on her. Esi started to protest. But he went on doing what he had determined to do all morning. He squeezed her breast repeatedly, thrust his tongue into her mouth, forced her unwilling legs apart, entered her, plunging in and out of her, thrashing to the left, to the right, pounding and just pounding away. Then it was all over. Breathing like a marathon runner at the end of a particularly grueling race, he got off her, and fell heavily back on his side of the bed. (Aidoo 9)

The disturbing scene exemplifies the trauma of embodied patriarchy not only as a fictional event, but also as a reflection of real cultural issues. Oko's act of rape was performed out of the desire to reestablish himself as the dominant, male figure in his marriage. He perceives Esi's educational and professional success as a threat to his masculinity, and in response, turns to sexual violence to reassert himself as a male. Ironically, these are also the same traits for which he claims to love her. The role that Esi takes as a successful career woman and breadwinner can be categorized as Western and is thereby at odds with the traditional gender and social structures

that are valued by many in post-colonial Accra society. Before the rape, Oko argues to his wife, “My friends are laughing at me... They think I am not behaving like a man” (Aidoo 8). This demonstrates that Oko is being subjected to ridicule for fulfilling a traditionally female or non-masculine role of caring for the couple’s child and home, leaving him feeling ashamed and emasculated. The act of rape is both physical and psychological in nature and a means through which Oko intends to reclaim ownership of his wife and masculinity. In this way, the body becomes as much a tool of social oppression as the patriarchal ideology. According to the social standards that Oko adheres to, taking ownership of his wife’s body, regardless of her consent, is his right and privilege as a man and husband. The act empowers him at the expense of his own wife.

The act of rape serves as the ultimate example of embodied patriarchy. Its very nature gives power to the rapist and disempowers the victim, regardless of gender. The attacker uses his or her body as a tool to both physically and psychologically disempower and humiliate the victim. In Susan Brownmiller’s classic feminist text on sexual assault, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, the author explains, “A sexual assault is an invasion of bodily integrity and a violation of freedom and self-determination wherever it happens to take place, in or out of the marriage bed” (381). In a society that favors masculine power, aggression, and assertion over passive femininity, rape is a means of inscribing patriarchal power structures onto the physical body and asserting the dominance of the oppressor.

Following the traumatic marital rape scene, Esi imagines how she would be ridiculed if she were to present the idea of the prevalence of marital rape to a group of her academic peers: “There are boos from the men, and uncomfortable titters from the women. At the end of it, there is predictable hostile outrage. ‘Yes, we told you, didn’t we? What is killing us now are all these

imported feminist ideas” (Aidoo 11). It is clear from this reflection that Esi acknowledges that her culture does not accept the notion of marital rape and regards it as a useless novelty of the West. It is not something that anyone should be considered with, and it is belittled as an existing issue. The disdain for the topic of marital rape is not confined to the mere admonishment from a group of academics; rather, the concept is completely absent from the characters’ Ghanaian language, Akan. Esi is asked, “How would you describe ‘marital rape’ in Akan?” and is stumped due to the utter lack of words to represent such a notion in her first language (Aidoo 12). The lack of a word for marital rape in Akan denies ownership of the act to any degree. If there is no word, there can be no definition. Without a definition, there can be no concept. Who, then, can be held accountable for an act that, according to Akan language, does not exist? The absence of terminology to recognize a woman’s right to her own body again juxtaposes Western and Ghanaian cultures in a manner that leaves them at odds.

In English, the language of the colonists and oppressors, there is a word for marital rape, yet in the very language native to the Akan culture, there is not. This leads to the sentiment that to accept and acknowledge an aspect of the oppressor’s language and deny the language that aids in defining a national and cultural identity is a refusal of one’s fidelity to heritage. Insisting on the existence and substantiality of marital rape would then place Esi in a predicament of being the “other” by fostering a Western perspective on marital rape. By acknowledging that the violent act of her husband is wrong and taking subsequent action to emancipate herself from him, Esi is denying the social norms of her society and accepting those of the West: “Marital rape? No. The society could not possibly have an indigenous word or phrase for it. Sex is something a husband claims from his wife as his right. Any time. And at his convenience” (Aidoo 12). According to these cultural parameters, Oko was in his right to take violent control of Esi’s body,

despite her resistance. Esi informs her mother and grandmother of why she desires to divorce Oko, to which they respond with anger: “‘What is the problem?’ both her grandmother and her mother really screamed this time: the former with her walking stick raised as though to strike her, and the latter bursting into tears...’Are you mad?’“ (Aidoo 38). Although Esi hopes for have the support of her family in dealing with the assault, the mother and grandmother’s reactions demonstrate that marital rape is not considered to be a violation of the wife’s body; instead, Esi is chastised for her selfishness. When Esi, to the disdain of many, chooses to leave her husband, she is reclaiming ownership of her own body. Her actions are symbolic of the greater post-colonial society in its defiance of colonial hegemony, reclaiming its inherent rights to traditional cultural. Unlike those who criticize her for divorcing her husband, Esi finds the source of her oppression in her husband, not in her acceptance of Western values. Ultimately, Esi is liberating herself from social restrictions and reclaiming her own body and identity as a woman.

After abandoning her marriage to Oko, Esi attempts a second, polygamous marriage with the charming Ali. The Akan, Ghana's most populous ethnic group, have traditionally practiced polygamy regardless of individuals' affiliations with Christianity or Islam, the two most common religions in the country. Aidoo demonstrates this in the novel, representing Ali as growing up in a strictly Muslim family and carrying on the polygamous tradition of his father. Many of these cultural practices, however, have been abandoned in favor of Western or "modernized" belief systems, including monogamous marriage. In this way, Esi’s decision to abandon her monogamous marriage to Oko in favor of a polygamous relationship with Ali could be read as a refusal of social norms. This refusal is also demonstrated as she confides to her friend, “Opokuya, monogamy is so stifling” (Aidoo 98). Instead of abiding by the social convention

that dictates that a single woman belong to a single man, Esi finds a more accommodating and empowering relationship in her polygamous marriage, which by Islamic law, or sharia, mandates equality and respect between husband and wife.

When Esi decides to accept Ali's proposal for marriage, she attempts to reclaim her sexuality and rights to her own body. Unlike what readers know of Esi's sexual relationship with Oko, Esi and Ali's sexual relationship is based on an acknowledgement of their equality as sexual beings. In the novel, Esi describes the freedom she feels as she walks naked after love-making with Ali, and he in turn expresses a great appreciation for Esi's confidence: "He knew very few women from his part of the world who even tried to be at ease with their own bodies... Most women behaved as if the world was full of awful things- beginning with their bodies" (Aidoo 75). Ali does not attempt to own Esi's body and even allows her to continue living in her own apartment, thereby standing as juxtaposition to Oko's raping of Esi, which intends to strip Esi of her power and independence. Although Esi is ultimately left feeling unsatisfied in her marriage to Ali, it is apparent that she has overcome some, but not all, of the gendered power restrictions she endures as a modern woman in Ghanaian society. Outside of the limits of her monogamous marriage, Esi is able to achieve some flexibility in her role as a woman, but continues to feel dissatisfied despite this newfound freedom. Even in the polygamous marriage, Esi is expected to perform as a wife by cooking and entertaining her husband. Despite the slight differences in her identity and role as a wife, Esi remains dissatisfied due to the rigid expectations of a second wife. In this way, it becomes apparent that Esi has merely exchanged one marital power structure for another, thus becoming just as disempowered by established cultural and religious institutions as before. As Connell states in her work, *Gender and Power*, "We cannot understand the place of gender in social process by drawing a line around a set of

‘gender institutions.’ Gender relations are present in *all* types of institutions” (120). In other words, formal power structures within a patriarchal system, including various forms of marriage, merely replicate the subjugation enforced by the larger society. The refusal of one oppressive system for another ultimately leaves Esi with feelings of loneliness and rejection when Ali favors spending time with his first wife and love, Fusena. This brings into question whether Esi’s role is truly consistent with polygamy or if she is merely fulfilling the role of a mistress. Despite her status as Ali’s wife, Esi exists as an object of pleasure for him and is cast aside once he becomes bored once her novelty fades. This demonstrates the superficiality of Esi and Ali’s marriage that leaves Esi feeling unfulfilled. Although Esi has found corporeal freedom, she has neglected her emotional and psychological needs in a relationship.

The polygamous marriage between Ali, Esi, and Fusena presents complex issues of body rights, identity, and ownership, which are primarily driven by male dominance. Fusena and Esi represent two parts of the ideal woman: domestic and subservient, as the former, and educated and determined, as the later. On a larger symbolic scale, this could also portray the harmful binary of traditionalism and progressivism. This explains both Ali's decision to marry each woman and the women's discontent in the marriage. As the women gain the freedom to an education, they are faced with choices in their work/life balance, such as Fusena’s initial desire to attend school and maintain a professional career in addition to fulfilling her roles of wife and mother. Despite his wife’s ambitions, Ali practices his authority over his wife by refusing her pursuit of these desires. After Ali marries Esi, however, he does not insist that she surrender her career, which is in drastic opposition to the ways Ali regards Fusena. This duplicity is symbolic of a patriarchal system’s ability to dictate restrictive, gendered marital roles, giving men power as husband while the women themselves are left without full options if they choose to become

wives. This, in turn, creates a gendered hierarchy in which the men are allotted certain privileges that women are denied. While Esi is allowed physical freedom to orient herself as she pleases, Fusena is limited both corporeally and intellectually in the role assigned to her by Ali.

Although Fusena's character is not nearly as developed as other key female characters, her contribution to the novel undeniably valuable. Fusena struggles with Ali's decision to take Esi as a second wife not only because of the issues she might hold with polygamy, but also because the second wife holds prestige as a statistician with a master's degree. This prestige comes from Esi's fulfillment of a role that has been traditionally masculine. In this way, Fusena and Esi seem to be exact opposites in terms of assigned gender roles, as Fusena gives up her dreams of an education and career to appease her husband. Esi, on the other hand, is unrelenting in her pursuit of success in the professional realm, to the point that it destroys her initial marriage to Oko. It is clear in *Changes* that Fusena resents her restricted role in her polygamous marriage, but maintains an obedient demeanor that is mandated by patriarchal social conventions. Her discontent in the marriage brings irony to Esi's own situation that finds her unhappy, despite her freedom and ability to pursue her career. This communicates a resounding message: because the women are unable to make choices without the disdain of their husbands, families, and society, they cannot achieve true freedom and contentment in their social and familial roles- physically, intellectually, sexually, and otherwise. It is clear that each female character is discontent in her circumstances, as they are all complicit in the patriarchal system of which they are a part.

Although Esi fulfills a more modern role in her marriage to Ali, she is just as stifled in marriage as Fusena, who fulfills a more traditional marital role. Esi and Fusena seem to create a binary of sorts, with Esi maintaining a role as a full-time career woman and Fusena as a full-time

mother. To bring in additional complexity to her spectrum of characters, Aidoo introduces the role of Opokuya, the dedicated wife, mother, and nurse.

Although Opokuya is never raped or overtly oppressed by her husband in the novel, her character experiences a unique form of embodied patriarchy. At first analysis, Opokuya seems to be the character who has it all: a loving husband, beautiful children, and security in her job as a nurse and midwife. On the inside however, Opokuya is consumed by an obsession with her physical appearance and weight, an internalized form of oppression: “Opokuya had thought quite hard about the politics of population and fat... Opokuya had not so far been able to sort out the weight issue that neatly, even in relation to herself” (Aidoo 15). Although Opokuya initially feels that attempts to convince African women to lose weight are intended to cut down their birth rate, she eventually admits that she “feels like a fraud” as a health professional because of her large frame, despite her healthy blood pressure and vitality (Aidoo 15). In this way, Opokuya has internalized the notion of what a woman’s body should be, which results in female self-policing. Elizabeth Grosz explains that “the adherence to and investment in these techniques of body marking signal women’s acceptance of and absorption into prevailing patriarchal paradigms” (144). In other words, the female obsession with physical appearance, including weight, is a patriarchal tool used to enforce self-regulation among women. When women are taught to be more concerned with their physical bodies than they are of their minds, they participate in self-surveillance, become self-regulating, and hinder themselves from making progress in a male-dominated society. Thus, existing gendered power structures are preserved. In this way, Opokuya’s self-consciousness about her weight is an embodied patriarchal ideology used to prevent her from truly actualizing her identity as a woman.

Aidoo does not describe or delve into the aftermath of Kubi's sexual advance on Esi, but it can be assumed that Kubi's final betrayal of Opokuya at the end of the novel is due to a sense of male entitlement that it reappears throughout the story, such as the rape of Esi, Kubi's refusal to let Opokuya drive the car, and Fusena's assigned role as a housewife. Although the reader does not learn how the encounter between Esi and Kubi affects Opokuya and her friendship with Esi, or even whether Opokuya ever discovers this incident, Kubi's actions demonstrate a social inscription of male-dominance as he freely begins to advance onto Esi without prompting. As Esi pushes out of Kubi's embrace, she hears her Nana's voice: "Remember that a man always gains stature in any way he chooses to associate with a woman-including adultery... But in her association with a man, a woman is always in danger of being diminished" (Aidoo 164). Esi's refusal of Kubi's advance serves as a disruption of existing gendered power structures that give precedence to male desire, as she demonstrates her unwillingness to participate in the act of adultery and betrayal of her friend. Esi's defiance does end the novel on a hopeful note, as it potentially foreshadows a discovery that she does not need a male presence in her life in order to be fulfilled and actualize her potential.

Through the three primary female characters,--Esi, Fusena, and Opokuya-- Aidoo creates a small spectrum of female characters to diversify the female experiences in *Changes*. By including the voice of diverse female characters outside of Esi's own experiences, Aidoo "not only opens the text to different debates on a number of issues, such as marriage, relationships and female independence, but also examines them from a variety of perspectives rather than operating within the perspectival constraints of a single-strand narrative" (Simpson 159). This diversification of characters gives a varied, although incomplete, depiction of the challenges Aidoo perceives women facing in their society. Although she wrote *Changes* as a portrayal of

lovers in Accra, “Aidoo does not pretend to represent all West African women, nor even all working women in Accra. Her main characters are clearly middle-class. Yet she avoids homogeneity as she introduces us to three different characters within that stratum” (Elia 137). Within the limited range of women that are represented in her characters, Aidoo channels visions of how she considers various women would exist in their social situations, particularly in relation to patriarchy, gender roles, and embodiment.

The interpersonal conflicts characters experience in *Changes* reflect the greater struggles of post-colonial Ghanaian society. Issues of conflicting identities, as well as a refusal of colonial hegemony drive the dynamics of both Aidoo’s characters and society as a whole. Sarah McWilliams points out oppressive notions of gender in a post-colonial African society: “the image [is] of African women as sexual beings who need to be controlled...for the support and well-being of their male counterparts. The intersecting and often competing discourses of economics, motherhood, and racial solidarity shape the options available for African women's sexual politics” (335). As sources of both gendered and colonial power are negotiated, characters in the text seek to establish a new order of gender and control that become embodied through trauma. On a micro level, Aidoo’s novel depicts fictional characters who struggle with ideas of ownership, equality, and identity as a result of embodied notions of gender and power in their new post-colonial society. Within the text, this idea is embodied in Oko’s rape of his wife in an effort to reestablish the gendered power dynamics of their relationship. Due to a clash of Western and traditional ideologies in the post-colonial climate, characters are reinventing themselves with less restriction, yet simultaneously accepting and rejecting integral parts of their culture. The effects of post-colonialism and patriarchy within Aidoo’s novel are difficult to differentiate, because “the domestication of African women cannot be separated from the

concerted efforts on the part of colonial authorities to control the population through the introduction of specifically European hierarchies such as the nuclear family” (Olaussen 62). As a result of post-colonialism, hierarchies of power and ownership are stripped down and reconstructed, oftentimes leaving individual characters at odds with greater society, especially as these power structures are invasively inscribed onto the physical body. This search for post-colonial identity and the affirmation of self-ownership has historically occurred in Ghana and is manifested in the characters and events of Aidoo’s novel.

The novel also engages a discussion of post-colonialism through its demonstration of how society’s notions of gender fail to evolve with contemporary women’s roles within the society. This creates conflict as women are allowed freedom to choose between traditional and Western cultures (or most commonly, a proportionate combination of the two), but are not necessarily accepted in these diverse roles by their own society. According to Dzokoto, “Due to Ghana’s colonial history and the impact of Westernization, Ghanaians today inhabit a complex reality—a multiplicity of overlapping, cultural worlds, each of which provides unique building blocks for the experience and expression of emotion” (107). This notion of complex ideologies also contributes to cultural conceptions of feminism, gender roles, and social hierarchy. As is exemplified in the female characters of Esi, Opokuya, and Fusena, there are varying degrees that Westernization applies itself to women’s roles within the societal and familial structures and contributes to their individual identity formation. In turn, each woman faces her own degree of embodied struggle in the face of social conventions and what is expected of them as Ghanaian women.

As stated in this thesis’ introduction, feminist theory must begin to consider oppression beyond the confines of a mind/body dichotomy. For this reason, overgeneralized definitions of

feminism are incompatible with the issues of body politics and gender in Aidoo's novel. Instead, characters' orientations within the novel should be analyzed in a manner that becomes universally understood through readers' recognition of an oppressive patriarchal system.

Although it is undeniable that issues with the embodiment of gender and power exist worldwide and vary from culture to culture, Aidoo paints a portrait of Ghanaian gender issues in a way that also demands audiences to acknowledge the unique dynamics of her characters' situations:

“Keenly aware of the societal changes affecting Ghanaian women in the 1980s and 1990s and the new dilemmas they faced, Aidoo creates female characters such as Esi, who claims that in the cultural, ideological, and social context of post-independence Africa, there is no place for single women” (Curry 180). The events of the novel and Esi's struggles confirm this aspect of fictional Accra, which stands as testament to Aidoo's awareness of women's situated perspective in the grand scheme of Accra's unique society and how it stands in comparison to the gender structures of other cultures.

Although Aidoo's novel is a work of fiction, the characters and events of the story hold immense worth as a reflection of numerous societies and their issues of patriarchy. *Changes* serves as an ideal example of how literature can raise consciousness of cultural and social issues for its audiences. The novel demonstrates the role of literature as consciousness in that it communicates Aidoo's own experiences for readers. According to Dzokoto, “As cultural products, emotion narratives form part of the common ground from which people appropriate to make sense of their own feeling experience” (108). For this reason, *Changes* opens the doors to discussion of marital rape as embodied patriarchy, as well how the female mind and body are equally oppressed by a patriarchal system. For many audiences, struggles with body and identity ownership are a reality. According to the author, “The way the novel ends means that the story

is not finished, as the issue is not resolved. What happens to a woman who wants to have a career, who also wants to have love? ...It is an issue of our times for women” (George 302).

Although Aidoo began writing *Changes* as a fictional representation of lovers in Accra society, she ultimately constructed a cultural artifact that contributes to both the global and local conversations of gender roles and body politics, giving testament to the social influence of literature.

## Chapter Two

### (Un)Disciplined Bodies in Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*

In many cultures, religion is used to reinforce patriarchal power structures and subjugates women by exerting control over the female body. According to many Islamic cultures, women are not considered weak or defenseless; rather, they are powerful and threaten to tempt men with their bodies. In discussing the subversion of power caused by female sexuality, Pierre Bourdieu explains:

The forces that are suspected of ...binding men through the attachments of passion, making them forget the obligations linked to their social dignity, bring about a reversal of the relation of domination, a deadly break in the ordinary, normal, natural order which is condemned as an offense against nature. (110)

Because female sexual empowerment subverts patriarchal power structures, it has been deemed appropriate in some traditional Islamic cultures to enforce practices that regulate the female body's movements and orientations. Restrictions are placed on a woman's physical appearance, such as some cultures' compulsory use of the burqa, which denies women the choice whether to veil their faces and bodies. Some radical cultures also condone the dangerous procedures of virginity restoration and clitoridectomy, during which the female body is mutilated to align with misguided perceptions of ideal femininity. In this way, the female body is acknowledged as powerful and therefore must be controlled in order to maintain a patriarchal order.

Debates over the female body have culminated during Arab Spring, one of the most influential political events in modern history that has produced numerous pro-democracy protests against political regimes across the Middle East. The flux in political and cultural powers has

produced one of the most volatile, violent women's rights movements on record. Within this movement, the female body has become a battleground for politics and women's rights: when women resist the government or cultural norms, their bodies are beaten, raped, and exposed to punish and humiliate them. In a remarkable response, Arab feminists have utilized their bodies to resist the oppression enforced by radical Islam. Nineteen year-old Tunisian Amina Sboui is one such example: in protest of political Islam's relentless derogation of women, the young woman posted to the internet bare-breasted self-portraits featuring her body inscribed with the Arabic script, "Fuck your morals. My body belongs to me and is not the source of anyone's honor" (Greenhouse). As Amina demonstrated with her photo, along with the actions of countless others, the female body is not by default inscribed with the limits of patriarchal oppression. Instead, it holds the power to reject, defy, and disorient male-biased systems of power.

In response to Amina, the radical Islamic government called for punishment in accordance with sharia, Islamic law:

The young lady should be punished according to sharia, with 80 to 100 lashes, but [because of] the severity of the act she has committed, she deserves to be stoned to death. Her act could bring about an epidemic. It could be contagious and give ideas to other women. It is therefore necessary to isolate [the incident]. (Elgot)

This statement is significant not only in that it addresses Amina's transgression with corporeal punishment, but also in that it acknowledges her actions as a contagion that could potentially inspire other women to resist systemic oppression. In this way, the female body fulfills the roles of oppression, resistance, and punishment. Although the female body is oppressed by cultural

and religious norms, it rejects the inscription of these beliefs onto its surface, thus inciting a backlash from the oppressors in the form of corporeal punishment.

Consistent with my claim that literature serves a role as a cultural artifact, the resistance and punishment of the female body is a theme also manifested frequently in the writing of Middle Eastern feminist authors. Just as the female body has been a source of resistance during the political and cultural turmoil of Arab Spring, the textual female body often serves a role of defiance in the face of oppression. In this way, literature manifests the cultural resistance to corrupt and biased systems of power. Within numerous texts, Arab feminist writers share their lived experiences of cultural resistance to raise consciousness among readers. In her novel, *Pillars of Salt*, Fadia Faqir challenges the stereotype of the shackled Arab woman by giving voice to the female Jordanian experience. In the face of physical oppression, Faqir's characters demonstrate the interrelation of the female mind and body in subverting gendered power structures. In doing so, the characters are punished by physical imprisonment and confinement to strict gender norms, thereby upholding the female body as a site for oppression, resistance, and punishment.

Although the female characters in Faqir's novel are subjected to relentless subjugation, they demonstrate a fighting resistance to the misogynistic laws and customs of their culture, thus defying the false construction of Islamic women as objects to be controlled. The characters and events of Faqir's novel serve as a manifestation of the mind and body's relativity in the face of imprisonment and censorship. When the physical body is held captive, the mind and soul are to suffer equally, but two central female characters in Faqir's novel disrupt this premise to reclaim their lives. The radical act of female self-claiming validates the women's experiences, despite

attempts to silence and remove the women from society. In this way, the female body is used as a means to resist political and social corruption that commits women to restrictive gender roles.

Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt* interweaves three different accounts of events that are set in 1920s Jordan. At this time, the country remains under British colonial rule. Maha, a Bedouin woman, recounts the events that led to her arrival in the mental asylum to the newly arrived Um Saad. According to Maha's version of events, she has served as the sole caretaker of her father's farm her whole life because of her brother Daffash's refusal to complete his duties. Daffash has rejected his family's nomadic way of life in favor of an urban lifestyle that places him closer to the British, who have political control and powerful status in Jordan. When she turns nineteen, Maha is married off to Harb, who she initially suspects to be just like the rest of the men in the village: birds of prey that hunt and devour their female prey. Maha reasons that "Just like any other man in our tribe, he proposed to me because I said no" (Faqir16). Throughout their marriage, however, Harb demonstrates otherwise to his wife, treating her as an equal and respecting her wishes. Maha demonstrates great strength and resistance throughout the novel through her defiance of cultural gender norms that dictate female subservience. The reader discovers it is for this reason that Maha was turned in to the mental asylum by her brother, who feels threatened by his sister's strong will and independent nature.

In response to hearing Maha's stories, Um Saad also recounts events from her own life that have led to her incarceration in the hospital. Through this conversation of stories, the two women are able to find common ground in their oppression, despite their different backgrounds. While Maha is a Bedouin woman, Um Saad lived in the city of Amman after fleeing to Jordan with her Syrian refugee parents. Having lived a relatively privileged urban lifestyle, Um Saad's experiences contrast greatly with those of Maha. Um Saad briefly attended public school in

Jordan, but was eventually withdrawn from her studies by her father. Although Um Saad enjoyed some freedom to enjoy the luxuries of the city, such as trips to the cinema, her home life was destroyed by her father's physical and psychological abuse. Um Saad's father spitefully marries her off to a butcher, who rapes and mistreats her. After enduring misery in her marriage, Um Saad is sent to the asylum by her husband when he wishes to take on another wife.

In addition to the women's stories, readers are also given the fundamental Islamic male perspective through the Storyteller's version of events. Because of the apparent radicalism of his perspective, the storyteller's credibility remains questionable throughout the book. Although the Storyteller initially gains readers' trust, the accuracy of his tale is called into question when it begins to conflict with Maha and Um Saad's accounts. While the women tell their tales of resistance, the Storyteller describes Maha according to the patriarchal views held by radical Islam: "[Maha,] made out of our father Adam's crooked rib, was cast out of heaven...I say that Maha was a shrew who used to chew the shredded flesh of mortals from sun birth to sun death" (Faqir 2-3). The Storyteller's misogynistic commentary dissuades readers from accepting his version of events, as it becomes apparent that he is reframing Maha and Um Saad's personal experiences from a fundamental religious perspective that depicts women as wicked seductresses who deceive and destroy pious men. In an interview with Faqir, she explains "I wanted to show how traditions are used to justify patriarchy, and to show that the narrative of the Storyteller is in conflict with the narrative of the women" (Bower 8). In this way, the Storyteller's account becomes a mere framing of the novel's events and a continual reminder of patriarchy's unrelenting nature. The Storyteller serves as an additional means of silencing the women's voices.

Early in the novel, the female body becomes a site for oppression when Maha learns that Daffash has raped her friend Nasra: “My friend has lost her virginity, her honor, her life. She was nothing now. No longer a virgin, absolutely nothing. A piece of flesh. A cheap whore” (Faqr 11). Instead of accepting Nasra’s fate as a ruined woman, Maha confronts her brother with an English rifle and threatens his life. In this way, Maha demonstrates that she is not complacent with a culture that condones rape without consequences for assailants- even her own brother. In spite of Maha’s resistance, Daffash claims, “She asked for it. Whenever she set her greedy eyes on me... she tempted me. She was always playing tunes on her pipe. It called me to touch her” (Faqr 12). When the sibling’s father enters the room to diffuse the situation, he commands Maha to lower the rifle and chastises Nasra for tempting Daffash. This further demonstrates the patriarchal notion of the objectified female body, as well as the Islamic ideology of women as temptresses. The female body serves not only as the site for embodied oppression with Nasra’s rape, but also as a site for subsequent resistance embodied through Maha’s violence toward Daffash. Although Maha is ultimately unsuccessful in reclaiming her friend’s honor, her failure communicates the patriarchal barriers that prevent women from receiving justice in male-biased power systems. When those in power subscribe to patriarchal values, women cannot achieve true justice in the presence of inequity.

While Maha’s obedience to her father is demonstrative of a patriarchal structure in which a male figure has the ultimate authority within a household, her obedience could also be interpreted as dedication to her family. Since Maha’s mother had died several years before, Maha’s relationship with her father is central to their family’s survival. Maha fulfills the role of caretaker in the family, assisting in the farm fields and home, cooking and cleaning for her father and brother. The farm’s success and her family’s survival depend on Maha’s dedication, proving

the value of the physical labor she exerts. Without her help, the farm and her family's livelihood would disappear, confirming the leverage that Maha has if she were to resist and forfeit her subservient role. In this way, Maha is not subservient at all, but vital to her family's survival.

Maha also demonstrates continued devotion to her father when, even as a married woman, she returns frequently to her father's farm to ensure that chores are completed and her father is cared for. Maha's return is forbidden by her culture; once a woman is married, she becomes the physical property of her husband and his family. By rejecting these social norms, Maha ventures outside of the physical spaces delineated for her as a woman and wife, thus subverting the gender role that society dictates for her. The continued labor that Maha performs for her family is traditionally masculine, as Daffash rejects his role as a son and heir to his father's land. By completing the labor expected of Daffash, Maha demonstrates resistance to cultural norms, risking her reputation and life to ensure her father's well-being. Although returning to her father's farm is considered taboo for a married woman, Maha does not suffer any immediate punishment, though her actions ultimately culminate with her admittance into the insane asylum. Daffash's betrayal of his sister reflects the greater social regard for women who reject complacency and advocate personal choice.

Female embodiment of oppression, resistance, and punishment can be observed again in Um Saad's stories of her life. When she is a young woman, Um Saad is given away as a bride by her spiteful father, who is angered when he discovers that Um Saad has fallen in love with a boy in the neighborhood. Fearing that Um Saad may tempt the boy and dishonor her family, the father promptly arranges a marriage to a poor butcher. Because Um Saad rejects the social expectation of her to perform as a marital commodity and instead seeks a romantic relationship, she is punished by her father by being forced into a doomed marriage with a man who frequently

mistreats and rapes her. In this way, Um Saad's father uses his male dominance to punish Um Saad by eliminating her personal choice and subjecting her to a life of physical and psychological oppression.

The rapes endured by Um Saad begin on her wedding night: "I will never forget one thing. At night, the man, my husband, who I later discovered was called Abu Saad, chased me and ripped my dress apart" (Faqir 109). In order to cope with the rape, as well as Abu Saad's stench of sheep intestines and dung, Um Saad finds solace in the thought of an afterlife: "I used to close my eyes, shut my mouth, and hand my body to Allah. If you are patient, you go to paradise" (Faqir 122). Um Saad's is complacent in her marriage and awaits the spiritual liberation that accompanies death. Once Um Saad is freed of her body, which is inscribed with patriarchal oppression, she can at last know freedom in the afterlife she believes in. When Abu Saad impregnates her, however, the disgust Um Saad feels for her husband becomes directed at herself and her own body: "I hated my body, my sticking out navel, and the baby which was sucking my insides" (Faqir 122). The unwanted pregnancy is yet another instance of Um Saad's body becoming a surface for inscribed oppression. Um Saad feels her body betraying her and instead embodying all that she despises in her husband. Now that she is pregnant, Um Saad's oppression is no longer a violation of her body; it *is* her body. In this way, the pregnancy serves as embodiment of female oppression and Um Saad's complacency in her subjugation. Despite her circumstances, Um Saad does not resist her husband, until he takes on a second wife without her permission. Um Saad's refusal to accept her husband's new wife angers her husband, and her liberation occurs when her own husband admits her to the insane asylum, which she calls "paradise" (Faqir 188). Although the madhouse is not the spiritual afterlife that Um Saad

envisioned, it offers a space of solace that the two women could not actualize in their lives outside the asylum's confines.

Despite the initial tension between the two women, Maha and Um Saad develop an understanding and appreciation for one another through the sharing of their personal experiences. Maha and Um Saad's refusal to accept the restraint of their physical bodies by the mental hospital is manifested through their desire to tell their stories. Nadine Sinno explains that "The novel's female protagonists appropriate and transform the prison and mental asylum respectively into vehicles for social critique, sites for female solidarity, and forums for creativity and self-expression through storytelling, staking claim to art's transformative potential to change everyday life" (68). In feminism, the telling of personal experiences has served as a primary means of consciousness-raising by allowing audiences to momentarily behold the hardships and oppression faced by another group or individual. The purpose of storytelling as an exercise in consciousness is to disorient the audience from their own personal biases and lived experiences, and then reorient them with a greater awareness. Maha and Um Saad's life stories serve as a consciousness-raising, enlightening both women- and readers- to the common challenges and triumphs experienced by various factions of Jordanian women.

Despite the physical removal from the outside world and the attempt to silence their voices, the women find empowerment by sharing their stories with one another. In this way, the characters are enabled to tell their stories in a manner that rejects the patriarchal and traditional realities of the culture. Even while their physical bodies are inscribed with the punishment of isolation, the women's resistance continues through storytelling. Although the women are voicing their thoughts and feelings in this remote setting, they are still inhibited from participating in such behavior outside of the asylum's walls. Accordingly, the asylum serves as

both a means of inclusion and exclusion from society. The women are included in their access to the freedom of expression denied to them by their patriarchal society, yet simultaneously find isolation from the world in which they cannot freely retell their stories. The hospital room provides a space for expression, story-telling, and consciousness-raising that does not openly exist outside of the asylum gates. Although the hospital room is confining for the women, it fails to extinguish their souls even when their bodies are physically restrained.

Reading the novel through a feminist lens, Maha and Um Saad's imprisonment in itself is symbolic of the oppression women face in a patriarchal system. Nadine Sinno explains in her essay, "From Confinement to Creativity":

After failing to legally obtain the land and prevent Maha's retaliatory actions against him—including physically assaulting him every time he hits her—Daffash feels overpowered by his sister. Rather than addressing their personal problems with the female protagonists, Umm Saad's husband and Maha's brother force the two women into a mental asylum so that they can avoid their retaliatory hostility and disruptive presence in their lives. (69-70)

In this way, the women's imprisonment is intended as punishment for their resistance against the gendered power structures that privilege the men in their lives. But to what degree are the women being physically or psychologically punished for their misdoings? Michel Foucault explains in his pivotal text, *Discipline and Punish*, that punishment has evolved beyond physical torture to incorporate psychological penalties to torture the mind (8). Foucault also points out that the body of the criminal is removed from society when an individual is punished with incarceration, which intends to reject that person's power and autonomy (26-30). Although the body is not necessarily subjected to physical harm through imprisonment, the mind and soul are

stripped of agency, thereby causing the imprisoned to suffer by psychological means. While the physical body is also being punished through restraint, the true target of modern incarceration is the soul.

In Faqir's novel, Maha and Um Saad's imprisonment serves not only as a removal of their physical presence in their society, but also as a means to strip them of their knowledge and lived experience. In this way, they are unable to share their experiences with others who may feel empowered or angered by the women's personal stories. If the women cannot be seen or heard, they are prevented from disrupting the gendered power structures. According to Faqir, the setting of an asylum was by no means an arbitrary choice: "You can see imprisonment, metaphorical and literal, everywhere in my work... My characters are always victims of the human condition – always confined" (Bower 10). In *Pillars of Salt*, the asylum serves to represent the greater society of Jordan and patriarchal cultures, in general, in their confinement of women's experiences and opportunities.

The asylum in which the novel is placed serves as a place of isolation that attempts to disconnect Maha and Um Saad from others in society. Although a madhouse is frequently understood as a place of silencing, it proves to be quite the opposite for the female characters as they fulfill the personal desire to let their stories be heard. Due to their incarceration, the women are unable to share their unconventional beliefs that challenge existing patriarchal order. This demonstrates that the women have been placed in the mental hospital on account of their perceivably radical identities as resistive women. Nadine Sinno suggests that the imprisonment is designed to correct the women's deviant, feminist mentality: "Monitored and supervised, a subject's movements are limited or confined to the space of the prison or asylum, where the subject is answerable to a new set of regulations, assumes a new persona and social role, and is

often expected to undergo some sort of rehabilitation” (69). The oppression of the women’s bodies and voices is intended to serve as a rehabilitation of the women before they may reenter society in accordance with existing gender norms and power structures.

Feminist thought frequently questions the reasons that women choose to remain oppressed instead of rejecting patriarchy’s systems of power. In many ways, men and women remain their own oppressors in their refusal to serve as a disruption of gendered power systems. In Pierre Bourdieu’s *Masculine Domination*, he offers an explanation in that “The division between the sexes appears to be ‘in the order of thing’, as people sometimes say to refer to what is normal, natural, to the point of being inevitable: it is present both- in the objectified state- in things,...in the whole social world, and- in the embodied state- in the habitus of the agents, functioning as systems of scheme of perception, thought, and action” (8). In other words, the patriarchal system of power has become natural to its inhabitants, especially as its power structures are embodied in every facet of its society. Because of masculine domination’s seeming normalcy, both men and women often fail to question and resist its influence. The body exists as a surface onto which patriarchal oppression can be inscribed, such as in the limitation of choices and the control over women’s desires. In this way, patriarchal oppression is internalized and choice becomes limited: “Even where the circumstances present many choices, it is often the case that our knowledge, our ability to judge, and our desires have been so distorted and manipulated by social influences as to make a mockery of the idea that we choose freely” (Wendell 17). Those who adamantly take control over their bodies and identities refuse patriarchal embodiment and reclaim the power of choice.

As Maha and Um Saad’s characters demonstrate, along with the women protesters of the Arab Spring, those who reject conventional gender roles are subjected to physical punishment as

a means to maintain social order. Although this punishment is not necessarily manifested through the same means as Maha and Um Saad's experiences, this punishment is apparent in the backlash against feminism that seeks to misrepresent and demonize those who question and refuse to embody current gendered power structures. As discussed by Foucault, punishment is a social construct meant to deter groups and individuals who seek to disrupt order, thus establishing the incarcerated delinquent as the object of body politics (301-3). Those who contradict social mandates for male superiority risk physical and psychological marginalization, as is represented in Faqir's novel through the imprisonment of Maha and Um Saad. With this threat of punishment to the physical body and psyche, it becomes easier to understand why men and women hesitate to disrupt existing patriarchal order. According to Susan Wendell, "When we realize the strength and pervasiveness of the social limitations and influences on women's choices, we can better understand why so many women have chosen and go on choosing situations that make them suffer and reduce their freedom" (18). The willful embodiment of patriarchal power structures exists because of the punishment and risks men and women face when the mind and body become agents of disruption. It is when incentive outweighs risk that groups and individuals become willing to disorient the flow of power.

According to Foucault, doctors are synonymous with executioners due to the power of judgment that they hold over others (11). In the novel, Maha and Um Saad are frequently monitored by the European doctor, Doctor Edwards, and his aides, who enter the women's chamber to physically subdue or silence them. Foucault posits that "We are in the society of...the doctor-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behavior, his aptitudes, his achievements" (304). This reflects the notion that doctors serve as surveillance and

regulators of the physical body, as the doctors and medical staff provide constant scrutiny of the two imprisoned women.

At one point in the novel, as Maha and Um Saad are exchanging stories, Doctor Edwards enters the chamber and chastises the women because they “never stop talking.” When the women respond with giggles and laughter, Doctor Edwards states in a concerned tone, “I will increase the dose,” before exiting the room (Faqr 110). The doctor’s use of a sedative to prevent the women from freely expressing themselves is reflective of the greater patriarchal culture that attempts to stifle the women. Because social power structures have failed to confine the women in conventional feminine roles, it is now the duty of the doctor to do so. In a later chapter, Um Saad reveals Doctor Edwards’ diagnosis of what ails her: “Doctor Edwards told me that I suffer from acute memory loss. Memory loss? Empty talk. I remember everything, even the things I do not want to remember. Forgetfulness is a blessing” (Faqr 130). This reveals that Doctor Edwards attempts to convince the women of their supposed insanity and control their thoughts. Through prescribing electric shock therapy to the women, he tries to clear away all memories of their lived experiences, reducing them to blank minds and imprisoned bodies. The doctor, along with other characters in the novel, is troubled by the women’s free spirits in the face of gendered oppression. The women’s refusal to adhere to conventional gendered power structures threatens them as dominant men, causing the doctor and others to turn to more severe forms of imprisonment and oppression.

In one of his final acts of violence toward the women, Doctor Edwards become enraged when he finds the women talking. In response, he orders Um Saad's head shaved: "Instantly, he handcuffed Um Saad and held her neck down with both hands. She looked like the goat that Raai and Jarbwa slaughtered for my wedding...Instead of blood, gray tufts of hair dripped to the

floor...This is what they do to control us" (Faqir 207-8). Shaving Um Saad's hair is a means of stripping away her womanhood and humiliating her. Additionally, it is considered taboo for a woman to openly reveal her hair to men. In this way, Doctor Edwards regresses to antiquated methods of torture and punishment that seek to torture the physical body and publicly shame the criminal. According to Foucault, the body and its physiological needs and desires were targeted by systems of punishment until the mid-nineteenth century, when it was deemed unethical and impractical to do so (15). It was realized that the body is temporary and the soul is eternal, which determines the psyche a more efficient target for inflicting lasting punishment. When modern forms of punishment fail to further oppress Maha and Um Saad, the doctor grows impatient and reverts to the physical punishment of the body through pain and humiliation. In this way, Doctor Edwards serves the role as executioner as he inflicts a humiliating physical punishment into Um Saad. In this way, Doctor Edwards serves as an enforcer of punishment onto the women's bodies, disciplining them for their refusal to be silenced. Doctor Edwards is a representation of the patriarchal oppression experienced in reality, and the women directly mirror the resistance found within Middle Eastern women's rights movements.

Despite the incredible strength and resistance demonstrated by Middle Eastern women, stereotypes within Western feminism misconstrue Arab women as helpless and subservient: mindless participants in an oppressive, male-dominated culture. They are conceptualized by Western feminists as individuals without voice or personal agency; even the various veils some women wear to conceal the body are the source of feminist criticism. In her essay, "Women and the Arab Spring," Nadine Naber explains:

Human rights frameworks developed in the global north often rely on 'culture-blaming,' defining culture or religion as though they exist in the abstract, outside historical

circumstances, and explaining culture or religion (i.e., Islam) as the cause of women's oppression. When it comes to addressing gender and human rights issues in Muslim majority societies, dominant U.S. feminist analyses often engage in 'culture-blaming.'

(11)

Depictions of Arab women often portray a group that is to be pitied for the psychological and physical oppression that they conduce with their unquestioning participation in their own subjugation. Many Western feminists have seen this as a call to action: the oppressed Arabic woman needs to be saved by the Western hero. Due to these problematic portrayals, Arab women have been cast as the false epitome of female oppression. Consider, for example, "the period following the attacks of September 11, 2001, when feminist organizations such as the Feminist Majority supported the Bush administration's invocation of 'Muslim women's oppression' as a pretext for military intervention in Afghanistan, despite the devastating impact of military invasion on Afghan women" (Naber 11). In this way, culture-blaming and the Western hero complex actually harm Middle Eastern women's agency over their own oppression. As they have consistently demonstrated, Arab women are not defenseless at all and have exhibited bravery despite the threat of political and social marginalization, as Isobel Coleman states in her essay, "Women and the Arab Revolts":

Their defiance has surprised many in the West who have long viewed Arab women as oppressed victims of conservative patriarchy and religion. Yet young Arab women today are significantly better educated, marry later, have fewer children, and are more likely to work outside the home than their mothers' generation. (215)

Images of the defiant Islamic woman are uncommon in Western feminist discourse, despite the courage and resistance exhibited by female protestors in the Arab Spring. Amina, along with

thousands of others, demonstrate the true resilience of the female body in the face of political and cultural oppression. Likewise, this embodiment is manifested in the literature that gives voice to the Arab woman spirit, raising consciousness of the female body's oppression, resistance, and punishment. In order for Western feminism to truly achieve mindfulness of the patriarchal oppression occurring in the Middle East, it must first overcome false constructions of Arab women. Faqir's *Pillars of Salt* aids in this pursuit, standing as a cultural artifact of the oppression and resistance being enacted on the female body.

Faqir's main purpose in composing *Pillars of Salt* was to finally give exposure to mid-20th century Jordanian women's voices and disrupt the widespread stereotypes of the weak Arab woman. The characters of the novel are not real, but their voices are the author's representation of Jordanian women's embodied experiences: "When political views are repressed and you live under a monolithic, monological autocracy, literature becomes an outlet for expressing such views...In other words, novels are windows to the world; they humanize, bring injustice to the readers' attention, and act as cultural bridges" (Bower 68). In this way, the novel also represents the voices of modern women who undergo the oppression of patriarchal societies. Although these modern women may not endure the same culture or circumstances of Maha and Um Saad, there are many characters and events in the novel that demonstrate the lived experience of the characters, thus orienting readers toward a unified womanhood resistant to patriarchal oppression.

## Chapter Three

### Ungendered Bodies in Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*

In addition to exploring my primary claim that patriarchal oppression is inscribed onto the physical female body, this final chapter is unique in that it will also explore the inverse thesis: the lack of a gendered body promotes freedom from institutionalized and cultural oppression. This statement is demonstrated by Jeanette Winterson's novel, *Written on the Body*, and its surrounding discourse. The novel follows a narrator whose gender identity and expression are unknown to the reader, producing circumstances that transcend the limiting power dynamics of gender. In this way, the novel migrates attention from the narrator and events of the novel to the ways in which gender and culture interact. While most reviewers have stalled in the debate of whether the narrator is male or female, I posit that there is much more to be gained through analyzing the actual implications of a gender-neutral narrator in juxtaposition to other gendered bodies within the text. Although the genderless narrator does not indicate any signs of physical repression, the female characters that s/he interacts with struggle continuously with issues of marriage, sex, and disease. In this chapter, I wish to further the conversation on both Winterson's novel and the relationship between gender and power by analyzing the metaphysical effects of removing a gendered body central to the novel's progression. In addition, I will explore the subjugation of the female body in the instances of marriage, sex, and disease, which reappear as key elements throughout the text.

*Written on the Body* follows a British narrator whose desire for married women fuels the novel's plot. Following numerous affairs with quirky characters, such as the anarcho-feminist Inge, who vindictively blows up the men's urinals at the Louvre, the narrator falls in love with

the beautiful, red-headed Louise. Shortly thereafter, the couple begins a seemingly perfect relationship, filled with romantic passion and heated sex. After Louise decides to file for a divorce, her husband, Elgin, reveals a secret to the narrator: Louise has been hiding her leukemia diagnosis, and Elgin, as a cancer researcher, is Louise's only hope for receiving advanced medical treatment. In response, the narrator abandons off his/her relationship with Louise, moving to Yorkshire and cutting off all communication with his/her lover to save her life. The remainder of the novel serves as a poetic lamentation of the narrator's loss, modeled after an anatomy textbook.

While Winterson's narrative approach in her other fictional works, such as *Oranges are not the Only Fruit*, *Sexing the Cherry*, and *The Passion*, follows conventions of lesbian fiction, *Written on the Body* disrupts the paradigm by withholding the central character's sex and gender. The traditional paradigm of lesbian fiction spans various genres, but features a fundamental and explicit acknowledgement of the desire between women. Instead of marking the narrator with explicit lesbianism, Winterson leaves the narrator's sex and gender unknown, thereby defying conventions of lesbian fiction. According to Lisa Moore, "By implicitly challenging the habitual paradigm, representing sexuality conspicuously unmarks the ways gender and sexuality normally coalesce to reassert the complementary duality of sexual difference" (107). In this way, Winterson revisions queer narrative and masculine/feminine dichotomies by casting the narrator as ungendered. The functionality of a genderless narrator brings the importance of sex and gender into question: does the physical gendered body play as much of a role as in orientations as the discourse suggests? In this way, Winterson's characters defy the mind/body binary system that is typically proliferated by Western feminist theory. Instead of relying on sex to determine characters' identities and orientations, Winterson transcends notions of sex and gender and

allows readers to envision a new type of relationship beyond the confines of masculinity and femininity.

Since Winterson herself identifies as lesbian and has written extensively on the lesbian female experience in her other works, readers tend to perceive the narrator in *Written on the Body* as a lesbian as well. This has caused a debate that has stalled scholars in realizing the true implications of a genderless narrator. In *Written on the Body*, the narrator's actions are at times traditionally masculine, yet feminine at others, which has left readers perplexed and attempting to make sense of the narrator's identity. While most readers think of the narrator as a lesbian, others reject the notion that a woman can enact the behaviors of the narrator: urinate outdoors, desire to save and control a woman, punch a man in the throat, etc. As Pierre Bourdieu explains, "It has often been observed that, both in social perception and in language the masculine gender appears as non-marked, in a sense neuter in opposition to the feminine, which is explicitly characterized" (9). By leaving the narrator unmarked, Winterson has caused readers to view the narrator as masculine by default, resulting from a patriarchal system in which masculinity is preferred. The notion of a legible lesbian identity is, in itself, problematic. In her essay, "Wittig's Material Practice: Universalizing a Minority Point of View," Judith Butler describes how social constructions of lesbianism are inherently troubled:

If we thought we understood that lesbians were women who more or less conduct their sexual lives with other women, we have misunderstood what it is to be a lesbian. For Wittig, 'woman'—and even sometimes the plural 'women'—is a category that belongs to the 'social contract,' which is 'heterosexuality.' This means that the category has been devised and implemented to keep the presumptive status of heterosexuality in its place at the foundation of culture. The category must be assaulted and nullified, rendered

obsolete, if we are to understand what it means to be a lesbian. (523)

In this way, discussions of the narrator's gender and sex limit the ways in which readers can make meaning of the character's experiences, as assumptions about gender and sex preclude the actualization of the narrator's lived experiences. As a result of the need for corporeal legibility, it seems near-impossible for readers to delve past conventional gender norms to actualize a genderless body.

The narrator's undisclosed gender also complicates the ways in which s/he experiences oppression throughout the novel. Due to his/her lack of a gendered body, it is difficult to determine specifically how the narrator participates in or rejects a patriarchal system. For the purposes of this thesis, I acknowledge that the narrator cannot be categorized as male or female; therefore, s/he cannot experience patriarchal oppression in a traditional manner, except to interact with gendered characters who participate in a male-biased system. The freedom from gender norms allows the narrator to exhibit both masculine and feminine behaviors that might otherwise be rejected by societal gender conventions. The narrator enacts behaviors that are regarded as either masculine or feminine in nature, reinforcing Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity.

Throughout her various works, Butler argues that gender is a cultural construct that is performed and inscribed upon the physical body. In this way, gender is not an innate quality, but rather an identity that one performs according to social conventions. In a patriarchal system, masculinity is performed through domination, while femininity is communicated by acts of submission. Cultural understandings of gender inscribe bodies with predetermined expectations outside of biological sex, and these understandings have no concrete basis. According to Butler, "what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable

reality” (*Gender Trouble* xxiii). In other words, the limitations of gender are not limitations at all; rather, they are culturally accepted norms that have the capability to change over time. With this in mind, it becomes impossible that the narrator is either heterosexual or a lesbian, as these two identities as merely social constructs. This makes the debate on the narrator's gender and sex even more obsolete. Butler also asserts that biological sex is understood as a materialized bodily norm and is exclusive of gender: "Sex' is, thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the 'one' becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility" (*Bodies that Matter* 2). Without a known sex then, a body is cast as unviable. By subverting the body's legibility in a society driven by gendered power structures, the narrator in *Written on the Body* rejects bodily inscriptions of gender and sex, thus subverting readers' understanding of male/female and masculine/feminine identities. By acknowledging the arbitrary confines of gender and sex, the narrator allows for idealized notion of identity that is not limited by corporeal forms or orientations of bodies.

Throughout her novel, Winterson offers a postmodern perspective on the body. The narrator's ambiguous gender expression disrupts heteronormative language, not by suggesting that the narrator is male or female, but by disrupting the body's legibility and role in gendered power structures. Readers are not given any conventional markers of gender or sex, which disorients their constructions of what it means to be a man or woman experiencing love and loss. In employing this narrative technique, Winterson brings the importance of gender and sex into question. Disorienting visions of gender is valuable in a society that experiences increasingly polarized ideals masculine and feminine traits, consequentially magnifying the oppression men and women experience within such a system. Bringing awareness to this oppression allows

readers to consider the implications of patriarchal society and how individual's actions and interactions are repressed by societal gender norms. In Winterson's work, the narrator is oriented toward others without the confines of a heteronormative, gendered system, while other, gendered characters embody the patriarchal culture in which they live.

Throughout the novel, women leave their husbands or partners in favor of a relationship with the narrator. This seems to employ the trope of the womanizer whose charm and voracious sexual appetite compels him to steal away other men's partners. The narrator's unmarked body, however, prevents this trope from being actualized: would it not be possible that a woman could have an equally voracious appetite for married women? Regardless of sex and gender, the narrator clearly offers something outside of conventional relationships that these married women seek. The narrator states, "I've been through a lot of marriages. Not down the aisle but always up the stairs. I began to realize I was hearing the same story every time" (Winterson 13). In this way, the narrator serves as a disruption of heteronormativity in his/her rejection of marital norms. Again, this is not a gendered trait, but rather one that brings the importance of a gendered body into question. Outside of the confines of a traditional marriage, the narrator and his/her lovers create an alternative space to orient themselves, both physically and metaphysically. The physical and emotional fulfillment that the narrator and his/her lovers experience represents the actualization of pleasure outside of restrictive societal expectations, subverting the gender and sexual norms dictated by a male-dominated marital relationship.

In the novel, marriage is represented as oppressive in numerous ways. Although marriage is not in and of itself an inherently oppressive institution, traditional marriage within a patriarchal culture, such as that of *Written on the Body*, is by default modeled to serve the male and oppress the female. In his work, *Masculine Domination*, Pierre Bourdieu explains that

within a "matrimonial market...women can only appear there as objects, or, more precisely, as symbols whose meaning is constituted outside of them and whose function to contribute to the perpetuation or expansion of the capital held by men" (43). In other words, marriage in a patriarchal system casts the woman as a commodity to be used and objectified by her husband. This is exemplified by characters in the novel whose role as a symbolic object- that of a wife, child-bearer, or housekeeper- has left them unsatisfied in their marriages and searching for greater fulfillment. The women find this satisfaction in the narrator, whose queer perceptions of sex, marriage, and love transcend the gendered power structures of marriage. By regarding his/her lovers as equals instead of objects to be dominated, the narrator liberates the women to metaphysical levels of love, lust, and sex, intertwining the physical body and psyche.

The narrator's relationship with Louise is unique in its metaphysical qualities; although Louise's sex and gender identity are made explicit to readers through dialogue and sexual descriptions, she experiences freedom from institutionalized gender roles when she is in the narrator's presence. Louise, in this way, fulfills a dual role: one of the tamed trophy wife and another of the free-spirited beauty. Within her marriage to Elgin, Louise serves as an obedient housewife, despite the fact that she has earned her doctorate in Art History. Even with her education, Louise has turned down opportunities and resigned herself to a role that she has not chosen, but has been dictated to her by cultural expectations. As the wife of a medical doctor, Louise is meant to be seen but not heard; her existence is dedicated solely to enhancing her husband's reputation. In this way, Louise is both physically and psychologically trapped by her marriage to Elgin. She exists as a commodity and nothing more.

Early in the novel, the peculiarities of Louise's relationship with Elgin are revealed. Although Louise is initially unimpressed by Elgin during their courtship at Cambridge

University, Elgin falls in love when she defeats him during a Debating Society competition. Louise is eventually captivated by her husband when he reveals his desire to be dominated. Elgin reveals himself as a masochist, which is the factor that finally wins Louise over: she "had just begun to suspect him being a masochist. This was confirmed when he lay on his single bed, legs apart, and begged her to scaffold his penis with bulldog clips. 'I can take it,' he said. 'I'm going to be a doctor'" (Winterson 34). With Elgin's sexual deviation being the determining factor in Louise's willingness to marry him, the terms of their relationship are brought into question, as the couple's sexual relationship is not consistent with the otherwise oppressive aspects of the marriage. Elgin's desire for pain and to be sexually dominated is in stark contrast to the control that he seeks over his wife, as demonstrated by the restrictive role he expects her to fulfill as his wife. Although Louise's role as wife is stifling, her physical relationship with Elgin serves as her sole opportunity to practice a power and dominance that is otherwise forbidden to her as a woman. In this way, the bodily surface becomes an alternative space for a gendered power structure that does not exist outside of sex for Louise. Despite the availability of this sexual power outlet, Louise's ability to be physically and sexually dominant proves to be insufficient, as she turns to the narrator for both physical and psychological fulfillment. Louise's affair with the narrator offers a metaphysical space that transcends the mind/body separation that is apparent in Louise's interactions with her husband. While sex with Elgin offers a temporary escape from a traditional, male-dominated marriage, the affair between Louise and the narrator is not determined by any such gendered power structures.

After Louise consents to an affair with the narrator, her character becomes complex and multifaceted, especially in contrast to the limited role she conformed to as a wife. As the couple delves deeper into a relationship, Louise becomes increasingly strong-willed and claims the

ability to choose for herself. Instead of resigning herself to the limitations of a subservient wife, Louise is able to construct a life for herself that is based on autonomy, thus rejecting the gendered power structures that deemed her powerless as a wife. Louise's newfound happiness demonstrates how overcoming the barriers of gendered marital norms gives way to the actualization of self-identity and the ability to define relationships on one's own terms.

Unlike the narrator, Louise is plagued by the expectations of her role as a woman and wife. Throughout the novel, Louise demonstrates embodied oppression through the failings of her physical body: miscarriage and leukemia. Louise's cancer is symbolic of the oppression she feels within her marriage. While Louise's marriage to Elgin is emotionally and psychologically stifling, it is directly mirrored by the physical atrophy brought on by her disease. The two sources of Louise's oppression, Elgin and disease, are intertwined when her ability to overcome the cancer becomes dependent on her relationship with Elgin. Since Elgin is a renowned cancer researcher, he can provide Louise with the most advanced cancer treatments that the medical world has to offer. If she stays with Elgin, Louise accepts the terminal condition of her illness and agrees to receive his treatment that may save her life. On the other hand, Louise could abandon her marriage to Elgin in favor of her relationship with the narrator: a choice with likely fatal consequences. While cancer is an affliction of the physical body, Louise's existence becomes dependent upon her acceptance or rejection of her role as a wife. It is eventually revealed that the treatments Elgin offers for Louise were a false construct created by Elgin to oppress and control his wife, as well as deter the narrator from being further involved in the affair. A second opinion offered by another doctor reveals that Louise is not as sickly as Elgin tries to convince his wife of. This reflects the ways in which Elgin uses marriage to stifle Louise: their marriage exists as a facade created to benefit Elgin as a man and husband, leaving

his wife seemingly without choice. Elgin reduces his wife physically to an invalid in order to maintain her oppressed state and reassert himself as the dominant figure within the marriage. Not knowing of the second diagnosis, the narrator leaves Louise to ensure that she receives adequate medical treatment. The narrator reasons that if s/he stays with Louise, she would be denied the advanced treatments offered by Elgin, thus risking her life for love and happiness. The narrator's actions are revealed to be in vain, as Louise rejects both her marriage to Elgin and the advanced cancer treatments, thus freeing herself from both physical and psychological oppression.

By standing in direct juxtaposition to Elgin, the narrator poses an alternative option to marriage, just as the doctor's second opinion symbolizes a choice outside of medical diagnosis. Although Elgin has predicted Louise's death, she is granted life by an alternative to the prescribed cure. Marriage is also a default, prescribed cure to women, offering a normative role within the confines of restrictive gender roles. The advanced cancer treatments are symbolic of marriage in that it is a false cure for an oppressive disease. Louise subverts both physical and psychological expectations as she refuses to buy into the cancer diagnosis and her oppressive marriage. Although marriage is a prescribed means of happiness, Louise thrives outside of its oppressive confines when she becomes involved with the narrator. Likewise, the doctor's second opinion means that Louise can live her life freely without symptoms of disease. In this way, Louise liberates herself from the patriarchal oppression she embodies with her disease.

Although Louise finds a new purpose and actualizes her identity when she is involved romantically with the narrator, when the narrator abandons his/her relationship, Louise's survival is brought into question. Initially, it seems that without the narrator, Louise will not be able to exist as disconnectedly and must return to Elgin for support. It is revealed in the novel, however,

that even after the narrator has left his/her lover, Louise reasserts her independence and autonomy by refusing to return to her oppressive marriage. In this way, it is communicated that Louise has rejected the social notion that she, as a woman, must exist in relation to a supportive other. Pierre Bourdieu posits that women who complacently accept such a role are complicit in their own oppression, but they can resist oppression by recognizing the power structures at work: “Symbolic power cannot be exercised without the contribution of those who undergo it and who undergo it because they *construct* it as such” (40). Louise’s refusal to belong to anyone as a commodity subverts the expectation of the female as dominated and the male as dominator. While the narrator does not truly oppress Louise in this sense, Louise further deconstructs the gender binary by repudiating her predetermined role as the feminine object and commodity.

Louise's female body also fails to embody cultural norms by causing at least two miscarriages. After Louise is diagnosed with leukemia, she attempts to conceive a child with Elgin and loses each child before it comes to term. The miscarriages are revealed to be a result of Louise's cancer, as her disease leaves her body incapable of sustaining pregnancy. In this way, the cancer affects both Louise's own vitality and that of her desired children. Louise's infertility leaves her female identity at odds with the societal expectation of woman as child-bearer. A miscarriage represents not only a physical failure of the female body, but also a failure to adhere to cultural gender norms. The female body is associated with life, birth, and fertility, and its inability to represent these values through conception deems it barren and useless in accordance with social norms. Louise's inability to fulfill a role as child-bearer casts her as unfeminine and a subversion of female identity. Just as Louise vacates her role as subservient wife, she also forfeits her capacity for motherhood, although not necessarily willingly. The circumstances surrounding the attempted pregnancies are never revealed in the text, but Louise's

hesitancy to reveal the miscarriages to the narrator communicates a level of discomfort in her body's inability to conceive. It can be interpreted that Louise is aware of the physical failings of her body and the implications this failure has upon her identity as a woman.

The final sections of the novel are written with the conventions of an anatomy textbook, thus deconstructing the physical body and focusing on its individual parts:

For descriptive purposes the human body is separated into cavities. The cranial cavity contains the brain. Its boundaries are forced by the bones of the skull. Let me penetrate you. I am the archaeologist of tombs. I would devote my life to marking your passageways, the entrances and exits of that impressive mausoleum, your body.

(Winterson 119)

Throughout the novel, the narrator maintains an awareness of the connection between Louise's physical and metaphysical existence, but the revelation of Louise's cancer diagnosis leaves the narrator unable to process their relationship without acknowledgement of anatomy's impact. Before the narrator learns of Louise's diagnosis, she describes his/her lover's body as a surface to explored and loved:

I needed no more light than was in her touch, her fingers brushing my skin, bringing up the nerve ends. Eyes closed I began a voyage down her spine, the cobbled road of hers that brought me to a cleft and a damp valley then a deep pit to drown in. What other places are there in the world than those discovered on a lover's body? (Winterson 82)

In this way, the narrator acknowledges the body as the materialization of her lover and an intimate space to be explored together. The body serves as a tangible surface onto which the lovers' passion can be inscribed: "I was holding Louise's hand, conscious of it, but sensing too that a further intimacy might begin, the recognition of another person that is deeper than

consciousness, lodged in the body more than held in the mind" (Winterson 82). This corporeal purpose stands in direct opposition to the ways in which the gendered body is oppressed by social norms. In their lovemaking, the narrator and Louise are able to actualize and embody a standard of loving that is made inaccessible by patriarchal and marital expectations. Due to the absence of the narrator's gender, the couple is able to experience a connection that is not governed by domination or control.

As the narrator transitions into her anatomical descriptions of Louise's body, she begins to regard the body as an inscriptive surface for not only love and pleasure, but also disease and atrophy. The cancer, in this way, is a metaphor for the oppression suffered within a patriarchal system. While a patriarchal system enforces systemic gender norms that are inscribed onto the body, Louise's cancer serves as a means for Elgin to control her: "Cancer is an unpredictable condition. It is the body turning upon itself. We don't understand that yet. We know what happens but not why it happens or how to stop it" (Winterson 105). As a metaphor, this also speaks to the ways in which gendered systems of power remain arbitrary, yet continue to proliferate cultural beliefs and values. Taking apart and examining Louise's body, piece by piece, is a means through which the narrator grieves for his/her lover's body and acknowledges the complex corporeality of the human existence. In this section of the novel, the narrator makes reason out of Louise's terminal fate: "In the secret places of her thymus gland Louise is making too much of herself. Her faithful biology depends on regulation but the white T-cells have turned bandit...Why can't I dam their blind tide that filthies your blood?" (Winterson 115). The narrator continues to offer a description of Louise's biological body, exploring every anatomical system that constructs the human body. By deconstructing Louise's body, the narrator demonstrates the universal nature of the human body, delving past the inscriptive surfaces that

embody cultural systems. Beyond the inscriptive surface of the body- a surface that has been molded from its natural form into one that appeases cultural expectations- the human form is universal and cannot be oppressed by social constructions of gender.

In including both traditional narrative and the conventions of an anatomy textbook, Winterson subverts reader expectations of genre. While the narrative reflects the narrator's personal sentiment, the biological component of the text is a more objective perspective on the narrator's relationship with Louise. Bourdieu posits that gender is understood in opposites, which are embodied by objects and orientations: "The division of (sexual and other) things and activities according to the opposition between the male and female, while arbitrary when taken in isolation, receives its objective and subjective necessity from its insertion into a system of homologous oppositions- up/down, above/below, in front/behind..." (7). This system of meanings casts subjectivity as feminine, while objectivity and the unmarked are by default masculine. The narrative's emotion is socially constructed as feminine, but the textbook aspect of the novel is scientific, invoking reader's association of science with masculinity. The subversion of genre exhibited in *Written on the Body* directly reflects the narrator's own subversion of gender. In utilizing both narrative and scientific genres to convey events, the narrator is performing both femininity and masculinity, confirming his/her nonconforming gender identity.

Feminist discourse surrounding *Written on the Body* has failed to acknowledge the role of the deconstructed body and its implications for the text's meaning. Interestingly, queer theorists, such as Judith Butler and others, have already laid the framework through which the implications of a genderless identity can be understood. Since feminism defines itself through social constructions of "woman," it is inherently oppressive in its dichotomous representation of

gender. Just as Western feminism suffers from a blind-spot that does not acknowledge the mind/body relationship, it also disables the movement's potential in its inability to actualize gender identities outside of the traditional binary system. Narrow definitions of woman marginalized those who do not fit into a gender binary, thereby failing to liberate these groups from a patriarchal system. Winterson's novel disrupts this gender dichotomy, but scholars must first realize the value of this disruption before true progress can occur for non-conforming, oppressed individuals. There must also be an acknowledgement of the body's value as an inscriptive surface and a medium of self-identification. Winterson further the conversation by exploring the narrative possibilities of gender and sexuality. This offers an alternative experience for readers, compelling them to consider the limits of sex, gender, and sexuality. In her essay, "Embattled Subjects," Amy Fahraeus explains that "Winterson's text chooses a side, but it is a side that says relationships and sexuality are complicated, and intrinsically both fraught with a struggle for power and engendered" (81). By transcending the mind/body dichotomy, Winterson rejects the forced embodiment of patriarchal values and arbitrary gender norms, making progress for those who seek liberation from these oppressive systems.

## Conclusion

### Addressing the Blind Spot in Feminist Discourse

As demonstrated in each subsequent chapter, the relationship between cultural values and the physical body is apparent even within literary representations of societies. Although the phenomenon of embodiment can be observed within text, there is a lack of discussion regarding the implications of patriarchal embodiment in literature. If we regard text as cultural artifact, instances of patriarchal embodiment within literature can be engaged in the greater discussion of embodiment's effects, thus entering an interdisciplinary dialogue. Although supposing all texts to be true representations of their respective cultures is clearly problematic, considering the impact of written and visual texts on their audiences will demonstrate what is at stake for gender equality.

Just like other forms of textual media, literature communicates ideologies to its audiences and serves as a representation of reality to some degree. Ideas of masculinity, femininity, and gendered power structures are both replicated and challenged through text. Although current feminist discourse acknowledges the sexism apparent in patriarchal systems, it fails to address the role that the physical body plays in gendered oppression. The embodied patriarchy that exists within literary texts is only one defining factor in cultural understandings of gender and power, yet each contributing factor needs to be addressed in order for true gender equality to occur. If the representations of gender and power in literature are never fully engaged beyond a mind/body dichotomy, how can they be engaged in reality?

Aidoo's *Changes* and Faqir's *Pillars of Salt* each demonstrate the ways in which the female body becomes an inscribed surface of patriarchal values. Each author writes characters

who are victimized and/or complicit in a patriarchal system. By portraying how these characters are not only psychologically oppressed, but also physically inscribed by male-biased systems, Aidoo and Faqir call attention to the plight of the female existence that is largely ignored by Western feminism.

Although Winterson's *Written on the Body* is postmodern in its deconstruction of the physical, sexed body, her text conveys the possibilities beyond a restrictive patriarchal system. When we dissect the cultural value of this text, it is not necessarily that it represents the reality of Winterson's culture, but rather it opens readers minds to the potential of transcending an oppressive system by considering the limitless role of the ungendered body. Even in regarding such a progressive postmodern work, literary scholars have stalled in debates on textual masculinity and femininity. Greater social progress could be made if we instead read Winterson's work as a model for understanding sex and gender outside of a dichotomized patriarchal system in which male and female sexed bodies are limited in their constructions. While gendered characters in Winterson's novel suffer from a male-biased system, the genderless narrator serves as a vision for possibilities outside the confines of a gendered patriarchal society.

Embodiment occurs in real societies and is thus reflected in the literature of those cultures. As a real phenomenon, it is crucial to realize the implications of literature and other arts on the lived human experience. Literature teaches us much about ourselves and others, serving as means of connecting experiences and raising consciousness. According to Paul Schilder, "There is no question that there are from the beginning connecting links between all body images, and it is important to follow the lines of body image discourse" (235). Schilder's assertion rings true for literary studies and how the physical body is represented as an inscriptive surface. Examining politics of the textual body gives readers a greater understanding of the

body's capacity for embodying the values, cultures, and beliefs that permeate societies, thereby fostering acknowledgement on the mind/body connection.

By disrupting understandings of text, gendered bodies, and power in its application of embodiment to traditional methods of literary analysis, this thesis seeks to open a dialogue on the body within feminist thought. In order to transcend the oppressive dichotomies of mind/body and male/female, we must first consider the possibilities that exists outside of these separations.

According to Elizabeth Grosz:

If subjectivity is no longer conceived in binarized or dualist terms, either as the combination of mental or conceptual with material or physical elements or as the harmonious, unified cohesion of mind and body, then perhaps other ways of understanding corporeality, sexuality, and the difference between the sexes may be developed and explored which enable us to conceive of subjectivity in different terms than those provided by traditional philosophical and feminist understandings. (*vii*)

In this way, rejecting the notion of a mind/body split, as well as acknowledging the false social construct of gender and its binaries, will benefit feminist scholarship and ultimately overcome oppressive patriarchal systems that denies the human right to self-identify. Feminist scholars must acknowledge the inseparable nature of the mind/body relation and the phenomenon of embodied culture in order to attain true human equality.

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