

Rebellion and Female Agency in Ghada Samman's *Farewell, Damascus* (2017)

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ABSTRACT

Ghada Samman's Farewell, Damascus (2017) has attracted scholarly attention primarily for its political critique, narrative experimentation, and engagement with transnational feminist concerns. However, existing scholarship has yet to examine the novel through a sustained philosophical lens, specifically the existential feminist framework of Simone de Beauvoir. This gap is significant: reducing Zain's rebellion to social resistance alone overlooks the deeper existential dimensions of her struggle for selfhood, identity, and autonomous subjectivity. This study addresses that gap by examining the representation of rebellion and female agency in Farewell, Damascus through de Beauvoir's concepts of the Other, immanence, and transcendence. Using qualitative close textual analysis, the research investigates how patriarchal structures are constructed and challenged through the protagonist Zain's experiences across three central domains: marriage, motherhood, and intellectual expression. Drawing on de Beauvoir's argument that patriarchal society confines women to immanence by constructing them as the Other, beings defined in relation to men rather than as autonomous subjects. The study interprets Zain's divorce, rejection of compulsory motherhood, and engagement in clandestine writing as existential strategies of self-definition rather than mere acts of social defiance. The findings demonstrate that rebellion in the novel operates simultaneously as social resistance and as a philosophical process of subject formation, a sustained movement from imposed Otherness toward self-defined transcendence. The study concludes that Farewell, Damascus articulates a model of feminist resistance in which intellectual autonomy and self-determination serve as the primary means of confronting patriarchal authority, and argues that de Beauvoir's framework, while developed in a Western context, retains significant analytical power when applied to Arab literary and socio-cultural settings.

Keywords: rebellion; societal norms; feminist theory; patriarchal oppression

INTRODUCTION

The works of Syrian novelist Ghada Samman occupy a central position in modern Arab feminist literature due to their sustained engagement with gender, identity, and socio-cultural transformation. Her fiction frequently interrogates patriarchal authority while exploring the relationship between personal experience and broader political structures (Randall, 2022). *Farewell, Damascus* (2017) exemplifies this engagement by presenting a narrative that examines the limitations imposed on women within a mid-twentieth-century Arab social context. Through the experiences of its protagonist, Zain, the novel reveals how familial authority, marriage, and cultural expectations regulate women's identities and restrict their autonomy.

The narrative foregrounds the tension between social conformity and individual self-determination. Zain's rejection of prescribed gender roles, particularly those associated with marriage, motherhood, and domestic obedience, constitutes a sustained critique of patriarchal

ideology. Her resistance challenges the social construction of women as dependent subjects and exposes the mechanisms through which patriarchal systems maintain control. The novel thus provides a productive site for examining the relationship between gendered oppression and existential agency.

Existing scholarship on Ghada Samman has made significant contributions to understanding her literary project; however, it has done so predominantly through political, aesthetic, and sociological lenses. Studies have examined her engagement with nationalist discourse and post-national feminism (Gould, 2014), her use of the supernatural in representing historical trauma and political violence (Randall, 2022), and her deployment of magical realism as a mode of symbolic resistance (Suyoufie, 2009). While these readings are valuable, they share a common limitation: they treat rebellion in Samman's fiction as primarily a social and political phenomenon, a response to external structures of power without examining its deeper philosophical dimensions. This approach, however illuminating at the sociological level, is analytically insufficient when applied to a novel such as *Farewell, Damascus* (2017), in which Zain's resistance is not merely directed against specific social institutions but constitutes a fundamental renegotiation of her existence, identity, and subjectivity.

To read her rebellion purely in political or aesthetic terms is to miss precisely what is most philosophically significant about it: the movement of a conscious human subject from an imposed condition of Otherness toward a self-defined state of authentic freedom.

This limitation points to a specific and consequential blind spot in the existing scholarship. The field of Arab feminist literary criticism has developed a sophisticated understanding of the structural conditions of women's oppression, patriarchal institutions, cultural norms, and familial authority, but has been slower to engage with the existential and philosophical dimensions of women's resistance within those conditions (Douglas, 2023). As a result, acts of rebellion in Arab women's fiction risk being read reductively, as sociological data rather than as philosophically meaningful assertions of subjectivity. This gap is particularly significant in the case of *Farewell, Damascus* (2017), a novel whose protagonist does not simply resist patriarchal authority but actively constructs a new sense of self through her defiance, a process that demands philosophical, not merely political, analysis.

Furthermore, while de Beauvoir's existential feminist framework has been extensively applied in Western literary studies (Langley, 2024; Leboeuf, 2023), its application to Arab narrative and socio-cultural contexts remains critically underdeveloped (Douglas, 2023), leaving a substantial gap at the intersection of existential feminist theory and Arab feminist literary criticism. This study addresses that gap directly. By applying de Beauvoir's concepts of the Other, immanence, and transcendence to *Farewell, Damascus* (2017), it demonstrates that Zain's rebellion constitutes not merely an act of social defiance but a philosophically coherent existential process, one that both enriches our understanding of Samman's novel and demonstrates the cross-cultural analytical power of de Beauvoir's framework beyond its original Western context.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. To explore the mechanisms of the social, familial, and cultural construction of female Otherness as a precondition for *Farewell, Damascus*'s patriarchal structures, in which Zain's subjectivity is excluded and her identity defined in relation to a patriarchal authority rather than an autonomous selfhood.
2. To discuss the nature of Zain's rebellion (her divorce, refusal of compulsory motherhood, and clandestine literary writing activities) in relation to de Beauvoir's notion of transcendence, showing that Zain's rebellion is a philosophically coherent existential movement away from imposed immanence towards self-defined subjectivity.
3. To show that the novel is a primary arena for the existence of the feminist movement of resistance, as intellectual expression and writing are used in the novel as a means of self-presentation for Zain, as well as an act of subversion against the patriarchy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ghada Samman holds a leading place in contemporary Arab feminist literature, and her work has received the attention of scholars due to its political activism, experimentation with her style, and exploration of social standards. Gould (2014) focuses on post-national feminism that Samman has been negotiating in the Syrian context and the way she has managed to integrate gender critique with nationalist discourse. Equally, Randall (2022) examines the trilogy of civil war written by Samman in relation to the supernatural and its connection to political violence and historical trauma. Previously, Suyoufie (2009) examined magical realism in the fiction of Samman, focusing on the issue of narrative hybridity and symbolic resistance.

More recently, Laskar (2023) provides a biographical and literary overview of al-Sammān's career, situating her existentialist concerns within her broader literary project and affirming the centrality of freedom, identity, and social critique across her works. This scholarship further supports reading Samman through a philosophical lens, as the present study does through de Beauvoir's existential feminism.

Although these works shed light on significant aspects of the literary project undertaken by Samman, and especially her approaches to politics and aesthetics, relatively little has been done to compare *Farewell, Damascus* (2017) in terms of the consistency of its philosophising of gendered oppression. Scholarly discussion tends to predetermine the issues of war and exile or narrative experimentation, but the existential feminist aspect of the novel, specifically its activity within the context of autonomy, rebellion, and intellectual self-assertion, is underexplored.

The expanded feminist literature on Arab literature has explored how marriage, motherhood, and domestic confinement are some of the tools of patriarchal control. Gender hierarchies are contextualised by Ahmed (1992) and Abu-Lughod (1998) within socio-cultural and historical contexts in order to show the reproduction of systemic inequality by families. The idea of bargaining with patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988) also elaborates on the way women negotiate and even oppose the confining gender order. Since this body of scholarship, there has been a continued study of how Arab women writers critically engage with patriarchy through narrative.

The research shows that the writing of women in Arab contexts is a direct target of resistance to the stereotypes of women's socio-cultural and patriarchal oppression, which is based on literary strategies and the detection of the contradictions between religious discourse and women's oppression by patriarchal power. This follows the analytical approach of the present study, which interprets Zain's act of resistance in *Farewell, Damascus* (2017) as another literary and political action (Almuthaybiri, 2025).

In this way, although feminist interpretations of Arab fiction have been very useful in unravelling structural inequalities, there is still no conceptualisation of rebellion as an existential move, as opposed to a social response.

Simone de Beauvoir's book, *The Second Sex* (2011), remains key to feminist theory, particularly in the notion of Otherness, and the difference between immanence and transcendence. The main argument that Beauvoir puts forward is that the patriarchal society reduces women to monotonous household functions that do not leave any space for real self-creation. The active negation of imposed identities is transcendence, and this is liberation.

Recent scholarship has explored the exact connection that exists between freedom and agency in de Beauvoir's thinking, which suggests that what is oppressed is not freedom itself, but the ability to express it, and that women whose freedom is imprisoned are existentially free, but powerless in practice (Langley, 2024). This refined interpretation of de Beauvoir adds to the analytical framework used in the current study, especially in the understanding of Zain's defiant actions as manifestations of freedom that could be stifled by patriarchy but not destroyed.

Although the above scholarship has been done on Samman, feminist orientation, and representation of patriarchy in Arab fiction, and even theoretical approaches of existential feminism, no research has interwoven all of these elements into a particular study of *Farewell, Damascus* (2017). Specifically, the novel has not been sufficiently analysed as an existential rebellion story in which, for instance, divorce or the rejection of motherhood or underground writing is a movement from immanence to transcendence.

In the larger realm of feminist literary criticism, a growing number of scholars have shifted to theoretical approaches to follow and study the development of feminist theories in non-Western cultures, where Arab women's fiction has been regarded as a location for feminist theorising and a philosophical investigation of women's rights and the condition of the female in patriarchal society (Douglas, 2023). The present study adds to this growing critical tradition by looking at such a novel through this philosophical lens for the first time: *Farewell, Damascus* (2017).

This paper aims to address this gap by providing a long-term existential feminist interpretation of *Farewell, Damascus* (2017) that shows how the uprising of Zain is not only an act of social resistance but a philosophical restructuring of female subjectivity in a Syrian patriarchal society.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study employs the existential feminist philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir as its primary theoretical framework. The existential feminism of de Beauvoir, which is expressed most clearly in *The Second Sex* (2011), will serve as a series of analytical tools, centred on the concepts of the Other, immanence, and transcendence, with which the portrayal of female subjectivity, patriarchal oppression, and resistance in *Farewell, Damascus* (2017) will be examined systematically in the following sections. This section is dedicated to laying out the conceptual groundwork for this framework and its application to the literary text.

DE BEAUVOIR AND THE CONCEPT OF "THE OTHER"

One of the central themes in de Beauvoir's existential feminism is her notion of the "Other." According to De Beauvoir, in the patriarchal system, man becomes the Subject – the norm, the absolute, while woman is defined not by herself but only by man as his complement, his opposite, and his subordinate. According to De Beauvoir, in a patriarchal society, a woman is the inessential being that is defined against and subordinate to the essential male subject, the Other defined against the One (de Beauvoir, 2011, p. 26). "Otherness" is a socially and historically produced condition, not a biological given or a natural state, as it is constructed by cultural norms, family structures, legal systems, and ideologies that systematically deny women the status of autonomous subjects. Patriarchal society deconstructs women's identity by limiting them to the roles of daughter, wife, and mother only, and denies them the ability to truly define themselves. This creation of woman as Other is so ingrained into social life that it is felt as natural; women's subordination is invisible, and resistance feels like an irregular or transgressive action. This Otherness is a naturalisation that makes the oppression of women structurally tenacious and so hard for women to challenge from within the very systems they are part of.

IMMANENCE: THE CONDITION OF CONFINEMENT

The notion of Otherness is closely linked to the ideas of de Beauvoir's distinction between immanence and transcendence, which are the core of her philosophical analysis of oppressed women. In de Beauvoir's terms, immanence is the state of living without purpose, but rather one that is biologically determined, domestic, and dependent. In a patriarchal society, women have been assigned to the sphere of immanence, which means that women's identity is reduced to the role of a wife, a mother, a housekeeper, and a guardian of family honour. de Beauvoir (2011) argues that in these roles, which are imposed from outside, there is no opportunity for the real act of 'becoming' on the part of the woman: it is true to the becoming of others' needs or projects, but not the woman. Immanence is not just a material condition of confinement; it's an existential one. It's a systematic denial of a woman's capacity to define herself, act on the world, and build a meaningful life on her own terms. Importantly, de Beauvoir points out that the immanence of women is actively produced by the social institutions and cultural norms that circulate in society and regularly describe women's confinement as natural, necessary, and even desirable; women's resistance seems, in this way, transgressive, and women's self-assertion shameful (de Beauvoir, 2011). Women confined to immanence are not simply materially restricted; they are existentially diminished, denied the very conditions necessary for authentic human existence.

TRANSCENDENCE: THE PATH TO LIBERATION

Transcendence is what de Beauvoir has to offer as a foil to immanence, the existential condition to which all human beings are fundamentally entitled, even women. Transcendence is the ability to surpass one's conditions, to have an impact on the world, to make decisions and create projects, and to reject imposed identities from the outside. Whenever it is immanence, it is stagnation; whenever it is transcendence, it is movement; whenever it is immanence, it is confinement; whenever it is transcendence, it is agency; whenever it is immanence, it is others defining the woman; whenever it is transcendence, it is the woman defining herself. What de Beauvoir describes is a process of self-assertion, an active project, a conscious rejection of assigned roles, a deliberate claiming of one's freedom, transcendence – not a passive state found or inherited by

women, but an active, willed, and frequently hard work of self-assertion. Transcendence is not a matter of fitting into the role made available by the patriarchal society, but a matter of rejecting it, asserting oneself as an agent instead of an instrument, as one who is subject instead of one who is under.

De Beauvoir, however, is cautious to point out that transcendence is not open, freely, equally, to all women. It is limited by the social structures that make and encourage immanence. The woman who wants to break out of her assigned situation must do so in defiance of the oppositional situation that is present within her family, culture, and social world, which all want to return her to her “prescribed” place. Transcendence, in this sense, is relational; it is also costly, that is, it is not something that can be achieved independently, but rather in the face of and in the struggle with the forces of patriarchal control (de Beauvoir, 2011, p. 684). For de Beauvoir, it is rather an existential stance, a refusal of immanence that is not just a one-time gesture, but a lasting refusal that is constantly reenacted in a sense of ongoing self-determination, and that is always done with full awareness of the social ramifications of such refusal.

THE FRAMEWORK AS AN ANALYTICAL TOOL

The analytical framework in which the present study analyses *Farewell, Damascus (2017)* is developed through de Beauvoir's concepts of the Other, immanence, and transcendence. These ideas are not metaphors but rather interpretive categories which will be used systematically in the Discussion sections to come, where they will be invoked to explain the novel's portrayal of patriarchal institutions, of female self-determination, and of resistance. The framework addresses the nature of the rebellion as social, but also an existential process, that is, a philosophical shift from Otherness imposed by others to the subjectivity defined by oneself, from immanence to freedom of authentic transcendence. In this conceptual frame, Zain's experiences of marriage, motherhood, and intellectual expression will be examined as sites of the patriarchal and as sites of the existential.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study is a qualitative interpretive research design based on feminist literary criticism. As this study is concerned with the study of meaning, ideology, and representation in literary texts, these elements can only be explored in depth with qualitative interpretation; quantitative approaches may not be capable of doing this. The approach used is close textual analysis, in which the narrative techniques, characters, symbolization, and thematic development of *Farewell, Damascus (2017)* are analysed in terms of how they depict patriarchal control and female resistance. However, this interpretive approach is guided throughout by the existential feminist perspective of Simone de Beauvoir as defined in the Theoretical Framework section, which introduces the concepts of the Other, immanence, and transcendence, these being the analytical categories used to read and interpret the evidence within the text.

DATA SOURCE AND JUSTIFICATION

The main source of data for this study is the English translation of *Farewell, Damascus (2017)* by Ghada Samman, translated by Nancy Roberts, and published by Darf Publishers in 2017. This novel was selected for three reasons. First, it directly and persistently engages with the themes that are at the heart of this research: marriage, motherhood, intellectual autonomy, and female self-determination, in a socio-cultural environment in Syria in the middle of the 20th century. Second, the protagonist Zain is a very well-developed narrative space that allows for a consideration of existential feminist ideas in relation to a specific Arab literary and cultural context. Thirdly, and as detailed in the Literature Review, *Farewell, Damascus (2017)* is still an underdeveloped area for the study of existential feminist theory and could be a fruitful and original area of scholarly exploration. There are no secondary literary sources or supplementary texts used as data, but only the primary text is used for the analysis.

PASSAGE SELECTION CRITERIA

The novel passages were chosen using a series of explicit, consistent criteria. Passages were selected for analysis if they explicitly represent or reinforce patriarchal structures and expectations, depict Zain's experience of confinement, dependency, or subordination in a manner that illustrates immanence as defined by de Beauvoir, portray acts of resistance, defiance and self-assertion that reflect moves toward transcendence, or reveal the social cost of rebellion and mechanisms through which patriarchal society attempts to reinstate women to their assigned roles. Descriptive passages or transitional passages that are not directly related to these thematic and conceptual considerations were omitted. This selection process is used throughout the entire text of the novel, and not only on certain passages or certain sections based on selective reading; the analysis does not rely on the individual passages but is representative of the entire novel.

CODING AND CATEGORISATION

The selected passages were organised and coded according to three main analytical categories, which are directly related to de Beauvoir's theoretical framework. The first is the Construction of Otherness, which consists of passages in which Zain is constructed as other by her family, her husband, or her social community, not as an independent person, but as a person who is othered by her role as a woman. The second category, Conditions of Immanence, consists of passages where Zain feels trapped in domestic, reproductive, or socially-contingent roles—where she is actively denied freedom, or her intellectual expression and/or self-determination is suppressed. The third category, Acts of Transcendence, refers to moments when Zain actively resists, refuses, or transcends imposed roles on her, such as being divorced and rejecting the concept of compulsory motherhood and clandestine writing. Passages chosen for each of these were allocated to one or more of these thematic functions in the overall narrative, and passages that were relevant to more than one of these thematic functions were examined in relation to each of the applicable dimensions.

INTERPRETIVE PROCEDURE

After coding and categorisation, the sets of passages were analysed through a close interpretation in a systematic manner in two stages. The first stage was the literary and narrative elements of the passage, which examined the language, imagery, dialogue, and narrative positions that develop the meaning. The second stage involved an interpretation of the passage in terms of de Beauvoir's conceptualisation, to see how it exemplifies, complicates, or extends the concept of Otherness, immanence, or transcendence as described in the Theoretical Framework. The two stages ensured that the analysis was always attentive to the literary particularity of the text and to its wider philosophical and feminist value. When several passages cover the same conceptual aspect, these passages may be read together to observe patterns, contradictions, and cumulative meanings in the narrative.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

This study is limited to a single literary text and does not claim to make generalizable claims about Arab feminist literature as a whole. The analysis is further constrained by the fact that it is based on the English translation of the novel, a direct translation of Samman's novel, which, of course, makes choices in translation that can impact the exactness of passages of importance. However, these restrictions are recognised as a feature of the interpretive single-text emphasis of the study, which emphasises depth of study rather than breadth. The study is not intended to be comprehensive, but rather to offer a systematic and representative examination of the major thematic and philosophical themes of Zain's narration.

DISCUSSION

MARRIAGE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF PATRIARCHAL CONTROL

In Farewell. Damascus, Samman introduces marriage as an instrumental mechanism of a patriarch and not a romantic affair between two individuals, to subjugate women in society and reduce them to second place to men. To the protagonist, marriage is a form of control which echoes de Beauvoir's concept that views marriage as a way of entrapping women with housewifery and ignoring their freedom and self-respect (de Beauvoir, 2011, p. 473).

The novel critiques the inequalities of the institution of marriage and its role in perpetuating gendered oppression through Zain's disillusionment with her marriage to Waseem.

Marriage provides a means to reinforce male dominance as women's place is held in the home, and women's value is assessed by their relationships to men. Zain's aunt's advice that "Got a lousy marriage? Well, forget divorce! The only option for a respectable girl is to get pregnant and have a baby to distract herself from her misery" (Samman, 2017, p. 11) illustrates the notion that marriage for women is not about fulfilling themselves and realising their potential, but is about duty, sacrifice and conformity. Similarly, de Beauvoir's analysis that, in patriarchal societies, marriage is not a contract of mutual partnership but a social institution by which women come to depend on men for life is shared.

This critique is evidenced by Zain's choice to marry Waseem out of love, whose reality revealed that marriage has replaced one form of oppression with another. Zain observes that "What I'd wanted was a home of my own... But all I'd done by getting married was trade one form of oppression for another" (Samman, 2017, p. 17). The understanding of this realisation holds the

fact that marriage is the final destination of a woman, and if faced with the slightest attempt to resist or deviate from this stereotypical perception, then she is always faced with emotional and psychological enslavement.

Along with that, Zain's marriage to Waseem represents the women's economic and emotional dependence that comes with every marriage. At this time, Waseem declares, "Her job is to do what I say and be content with what she's got" (Samman, 2017, p. 45). He pridefully treats Zain and is condescending towards her intellectual endeavours, representing a form of paternalistic expectation that women are meant to forego personal ambition or career achievement and live happily on the bench. All this renews the perception that family and spouses can give women satisfaction, rather than independence and self-esteem. According to Abu-Lughod (1998), such dynamics of gender make women economically and emotionally reliant upon male power (p. 162). The act of divorce and the resistance that Zain is going through towards motherhood are an extreme move against the institution of patriarchy in marriage and the roles that are dictated by marriage regarding identity and role towards Zain. By aborting her child, Zain denies that motherhood would be an overwhelming force, a way of relieving pain, or a way to derive cherished suffering. By so doing, Zain opposes the aspect of normalcy that women develop through various relations with men as daughters, wives, and mothers. This is a gesture of rebellion against the literal and symbolic limitations of marriage on women, specifically, and on the patriarchal system in general. The marital house, symbolically a place of refuge for a woman, turns into an oppressive place in *Farewell, Damascus* (2017).

Home symbolises confinement, where the concept of individuality has been eliminated in the context of Zain. Actually, Zain defies this limitation and is unwilling to become the obedient wife as the patriarchal text would wish her to. This can be connected to the idea that Al-Hibri (1982) uses to describe domestic spaces as spaces of control, preventing women from gaining intellectual or physical liberation (p. 213). Because Zain records her experiences, she begins to turn her own rebellion into a feminist protest. Spivak (1988) explains that it is necessary to reclaim intellectual capacity to undermine patriarchal discourses (p. 288).

Transcendence, in de Beauvoir's framework, requires the woman to consciously reject her assigned position and claim her existence as a self-determining subject rather than an instrument of patriarchal order.

REBELLION AS A MEANS OF FREEDOM

The liberation of Zain in a world of difficulties and male dominance is also described in *Farewell, Damascus* (2017), to show the idea of rebellion as not only her own struggle but also the struggle of the whole society. Such revolts against the conventional female roles in the family, society, as well as cultures are emancipation in and of themselves, proving that revolution is empowering. The novel depicts the protagonist operating within the confines of patriarchal culture despite her efforts to transform her life in opposition to gender roles prescribed by her culture. Another theory of Butler (1990) suggests that, on this basis, gender roles are constructed in that these societal norms regulate the behaviour of women and hence can become a denial of their choice.

Samman's writing captures the rebellion of her protagonist in relation to Butler's ideas about gender being a performance rather than individuality. Zain's experience can best be explained by what Simone de Beauvoir once said: women have to refuse 'Being for others' and reclaim their independence by breaking patriarchal limitations over them (de Beauvoir, 2011, p. 105). Despite the losses that come with resistance, Zain's rebellion shows that to gain self-employment and freedom, defiance is necessary.

Of all of the acts of rebellion in the novel, none loomed heavier than Zain's decision to divorce her husband, Waseem. Her choice is radical in a society where divorce is stigmatised as a failure or a threat to familial honour. Her act of reclamation grants her autonomy and challenges the story that a woman lacks value if she is unmarried, in many ways. The societal resistance to women's defiance is reflected in her grandmother's lament: "There's never been a single divorce in our family" (Samman, 2017, p. 51). But Zain's determination is consistent with Moghadam's (2003) notion that women's resistance can begin with single acts of defiance against intersecting institutions that are oppressive, like marriage (p. 215).

A second major aspect of Zain's rebellion is to abort her pregnancy and thus challenge the patriarchal glorification of motherhood as women's prime entelechy. Zain reflects, "I didn't want any child of mine to be born into a broken home the way I had been. I wanted to place a full stop at the end of the sentence and start fresh on a new line" (Samman, 2017, p. 10). Rather than accept the conventional discourse of motherhood as a distraction or a means of redemption from an unhappy marriage, she chooses to abort her pregnancy. This act of defiance is one against society's expectations for a woman to be defined by her reproductive role, as this plays into de Beauvoir's argument that mothers are tied to domesticity and therefore denied the opportunity to become more than women (de Beauvoir, 2011). In the same way, El Saadawi (1980) states that patriarchal societies ensure women's oppression under the guise of motherhood, which Zain's decision boldly defies.

Zain's inner voice becomes her own inner activist, driving her to more fully break free from the forces trying to rule over her. This voice, she says, is "the voice of the rebellious woman inside her—getting louder and louder" (Samman, 2017, p. 13). This inner rebellion culminates in her declaration to Waseem: "I'm my own legal guardian, and I want a divorce" (Samman, 2017, p. 66). Samman attempts to assert that women "are people on their own right; they are not incomplete or inferior men" (Bressler, 2003, p.154). Zain affirms her right to self-determination by challenging patriarchal limits on her subjectivity (p. 684), realising de Beauvoir's point that women should cultivate their own voice and take themselves back. This defiance is related to Spivak's (1988) assertion that for women to take back their voices is a crucial act against systems of silencing and marginalisation of women (p. 288). Accordingly, in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (2011) states that women are "not regarded as an autonomous being". According to her, while man is the "Subject," the "Absolute", woman is the "Other" (p.52).

Another powerful form of rebellion for Zain is writing. Her clandestine writing projects represent her refusal to belong to both society's expectations of subservience in women's intellectual production and her refusal to live up to a false expectation. In her writing, she associates writing with an illicit act, namely, "fornicating with language" (Samman, 2017, p. 13). Zain's metaphor of "fornicating with language" undermines collective taboos while rejecting the wiping out of the intellectual voices of women from Arab literature. Like other Arab feminist works that reclaim silenced narratives, her clandestine writing does the same. She signified her defiance of the patriarchal ideal of the submissive wife when she says, "I'm not going to be in his kitchen anymore! I'm going to devote full time to my studies and my clandestine writing projects" (Samman, 2017, p. 18). Zain can carve out her intellectual independence, challenging the cultural norms that speak of women and that it is not their place to sound anything other than their silence. According to Abu-Lughod (1998), intellectual resistance, like writing, can empower women to break through the narratives that support patriarchal control and provide spaces wherein there are alternative voices.

Although her rebellion is empowering, it leads to strong social backlash. Upon her cousin Hamida saying, “Your grand revolution flopped, and now you want a divorce” (Samman, 2017, p. 50), Hamida accuses her of being a bad model for other women. This societal reprobation is correlated with Kandiyoti’s (1988) note that a patriarchal system would harshly punish an act of defiance to maintain control. But Zain is adamant, insisting, “What people say doesn’t mean a thing to me. All I care about is what my own mind, heart, and conscience tell me” (Samman, 2017, p. 51). Her consistent dedication to her path provides the image of the resilience needed to rebel against patriarchal oppression and the radical potency of rebellion.

Additionally, Tong (2009) evaluates feminist frameworks that elucidate the fact that the liberation of women goes beyond the creation of the narration of overturning social conventions to the re-creation of the narrative of women’s identities. Thus, it is unnecessary to spend time on the countenance of the central character of Samman, whereby she becomes subversive to re-establish herself according to the wishes of society, because the intrigues encapsulate the encounters of liberty and identity during feminist logics.

Farewell, Damascus (2017) presents rebellion as both a personal and a political act — one through which Zain not only claims her own freedom but exposes and destabilises the patriarchal structures that sought to contain her. Along with the possibility of divorce, the abundance of the principle to become a mother, and the possibility of writing, Zain demonstrates that she makes decisions and proves herself in a society that would like to quiet her down; it is that rebellion is subjective and political, and that is what is necessary to liberate her. The cost of Zain’s defiance is isolation and condemnation, but her perseverance makes it clear that it is more important for her to be herself than to conform.

FEMALE AGENCY WITHIN PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURES

In *Farewell, Damascus* (2017), this oppression infiltrated the patriarchal element of the family, cultural and societal values that determine how women should be, how they should behave, and how they must function. Zain inhabits a world in which her gender, rather than her individual will, determines how she must live, a world in which patriarchal prescription overrides personal choice at every turn. Zain and her life under this tyrannical order contradict patriarchal systems and the formidable obstacles women can overcome to insist on their agency with such limitations.

The tragedy of Zain is considerably elaborated on in the theoretical framework of Simone de Beauvoir’s “The Other”. According to de Beauvoir, women are the equivalent of the Other in patriarchal society. They are not autonomous individuals but subordinated beings in relation to men. For de Beauvoir, women are “The inessential in front of the essential”(de Beauvoir, 2011, p. 26). Women are relegated to tertiary roles, and femininity is defined by male dominance, which means that women are relegated to being the objects of male observation and authority and failed attempts at control. Zain’s experiences clearly fall in line with this conceptualisation of women as the “Other”, denied the space to define herself as she wants to, unquestionably held as subordinate to “other” forces. Similarly, Leboeuf discusses the connection between submissiveness and patriarchy. There is another pressing question: her point applies to other forms of oppression. *We Are Not Born Submissive* uses as an organising principle that women’s submissiveness and the propagation of patriarchy are the same (Leboeuf, 2023, p. 3).

The patriarchal subjugation of her family is thinly veiled and large-scale, establishing a stifling atmosphere in which Zain’s agency is constantly robbed. A notable emotive instance is that of Zain’s aunt, who says: “Love?! Heaven forbid! You’re not allowed to get to know somebody

before you marry him. You've got to sign the marriage contract first!" (Samman, 2017, p. 11). This declares everything about the pressure women experience from family and society to obey prearranged marriages, where individual wishes are overlooked for family honour and the sake of society. If love and emotional connection are in reality secondary to duties of marriage, then marrying is seen as a system or mechanism by which the patriarchal male can control women's choices and make them comply with the patriarchal gender roles. In accord with de Beauvoir's statement, "Woman is not raised to the dignity of a person; she herself is part of man's patrimony, first her father's and then her husband's" (de Beauvoir, 2011, p. 117). Accordingly, Alkhatib (2024) asserts that the voices of women are expected to be heard by society, which reevaluates the overall position of women in various regions of the world.

Another striking example of how patriarchal values penetrate down into the family structure is Zain's reflection on her childhood. She recalls an incident where her uncle violently disposed of female kittens, stating: "When our cat had a litter once, my uncle threw the females against the Damascus wall and let the males live" (Samman, 2017, p. 13). This is a frightening metaphor of how women are devalued and excluded compared to men. The way the female kittens are being treated brutally in this story is not only physical violence but is also a symbolic form of the cultural belief that a woman is of lesser value and is expendable. As de Beauvoir suggests, in the existence of patriarchal societies, the existence of women has been characterised initially based on a concept that she lives to serve men, rather than to have an inherent value in her own. In addition, Butler asserts that the "hegemonic structure of patriarchy or masculine domination" is the dominant (Butler, 2004, p. 193). And this aligns with the dominant society of Zain. On the other hand, De Beauvoir claims that "like men, women could therefore lead independent, rationally ordered and autonomous lives once they were freed from artificially restricting myths and cultural assumptions" (2011, p. 154).

Other layers of Zain's oppression exist as internalised fear and self-doubt, which are due to living in this level of environment. She acknowledges the psychological toll of this patriarchal control: "If I'm going to take hold of my life again and escape the murder in disguise that's in store for crazy, disillusioned lovers like me, I've got to keep my secret all to myself" (Samman, 2017, p. 8). This is a simple statement of the internal conflict bred out of constant surveillance and policing of what women do. However, Zain is also under the control of multiple external and internal forces; she fears being socially ostracised and has internalised that the only way women can be accepted, as well as remain in power, is to play the role of the obedient woman. Accordingly, Ahmed (1992) argues that in patriarchal society, the family is usually a microcosm of wider inequalities of genders and that the lives of women are mainly subordinate to maintain male domination and to ensure social control (p. 75).

Nevertheless, despite these forces of oppression, Zain also says that she is capable of making choices and resorts to acts that coincide with a development that is itself not conforming to how she has been directed by a patriarchal system. The final stroke in the story and renouncement of the traditional cultural and family norm that women should silently suffer in a married relationship is her move to divorce her husband, Waseem. Zain recollects her choice of saying, "I'd made a mistake, and I wasn't going to go back on my decision to take hold of my life no matter what it took" (Samman, 2017, p. 11). This may be interpreted as a bold statement of Zain's agency, which is brought into central view as she tries to reclaim control over her life instead of being the submissive character that she had to be in life. Accordingly, her adventure becomes a literal confrontation with the essence and scope of the constraints put on women, and this sets the scope of how far the project of agency should be in opposition to the patriarchal apparatus. That

sort of male domination forms part of the basics of the feminist theories that "draw on the very real fact that women have repeatedly been marginalised and disregarded under historical hegemonic power structures in which men hold the bulk of authority" (White, 2013, p.10).

Zain's refusal to embrace motherhood as being redemptive further strengthens her defiance. By choosing to terminate her pregnancy, Zain throws some of that off; she is rejecting the notion that her humanity and her worth can be and should come attached to her reproductive capabilities. Rather, she states that "I didn't want that husband of mine to be the father of my son or daughter" (Samman, 2017, p. 10). Samman's heroine "must not weep about [her] lot in life but take an active part in creating and determining [her] own life and future " (Bressler, 2003, p.143), downplaying the definition of motherhood but elevating her own hold on autonomy and freedom. Such a decision echoes de Beauvoir's message about women refusing to play immanent roles of femininity instead achieving transcendence so as to attain self-actualisation rather than accepting the roles assigned to femininity (de Beauvoir, 2011, p. 478).

While *Farewell, Damascus* (2017) is the story of Zain's growing internal rebellion, her "inner voice" is intensified and, thus, becomes a symbol of her resistance to being controlled by patriarchy. De Beauvoir criticised the idea that women have to realise and evade the role that has been cast on them to actualise themselves (de Beauvoir, 2011, p. 684), and this internal movement conforms with de Beauvoir's opinion. The intensification of Zain's voice is a more positive sign of her movement toward self-determination, as she is starting to question and debunk cultural scripts defining her life. The charges of her cousin Hamida being unfaithful to her family reflect social pressure that women bear for breaking domestic rules.

The life of the character Zain in the novel *Farewell, Damascus* (2017) presents the smothering machine of patriarchy and emphasises how hard it is to exercise any kind of will within this system. Her narrative criticises the family and broader social order that tries to repress women and their life decisions, and praises the courage and strength needed to rebel against it. The novel's key qualities are twofold: the unveiling of the mechanisms of women's social subordination and the demonstration of the potential for resistance which patriarchy attempts to destroy but cannot.

WRITING AS AN ASSERTION OF FEMALE AGENCY

In *Farewell, Damascus* (2017), Zain's act of secret writing represents a revolutionary act of rebellion against patriarchal values that attack the intellectual and creative participation of women. Zain's commitment to write in a community that does not value the word of a woman defies the oppression of the culture against women and highlights the liberating power of intellectual protest. To reclaim a place of unmitigated achievement without compromise to her femininity, Zain employs writing as both a personal refuge and a political tool that empowers her to reclaim agency and challenge the structures within which she is contained. Her defiance matches the feminist standpoint that intellectual engagement is authoritative in reclaiming autonomy and combating social oppression.

In her writing, Zain is speaking out in the way that she chooses, which allows her to make it a conscious transgression, a defiant act that challenges the social taboo that keeps women from being intellectual and creative. She decides to work at her desk in the place of the kitchen, which is assigned by patriarchy for her, and she upholds her right to intellectual life.

This allusive metaphor represents her rebellion in creative expression against the social taboo for women to engage in intellectual activities. It is a declaration of her independence and a rejection of the roles that have been given to her in her family. In this, hooks (1984) asserts that

the prioritising of intellectual growth over domestic duties is a fundamental form of feminist resistance, whereby women also re-imagine and redefine expectations of themselves and others (p. 47).

Writing is not simply a means of rebellion but a way of self-discovery and liberation for Zain. By means of her literary effort, she makes good use of her voice of “the rebellious woman inside me” (Samman, 2017, p. 13). She decides to be an individual beyond the confines of society. The literary journey is Zain’s embodiment of a process in which de Beauvoir (2011) argues that intellectual pursuits are necessary for women to assert their subjectivity in order to free themselves from the role imposed by patriarchy (p. 684). Being able to write gives her the ability to build her own narrative free of the demands placed upon her by her family and even her community. She says, “No one has the right to stab me with his dagger. If I deserve a dagger in my chest, I’ll put it there myself” (Samman, 2017, p. 51). This is a self-assertion of ownership of her story and a rejection of external forces defining her.

The concealment with which Zain wrote emphasises the risks of intellectual resistance inherent in a patriarchal society. Samman reflects her clandestine work writing: “in secret, like somebody committing sin” (Samman, 2017, p. 13). This secrecy helps to illustrate the set of societal pressures under which women’s intellectual endeavours are considered inappropriate or transgressive. Nonetheless, Zain continues, epitomising the resilience necessary to stand up against oppressive norms. According to Sharabi (1988), women’s resistance is usually ambiguous, starting in the protected, private space (p. 84). This willingness to intellectually rebel, being unsupported by society, shows Zain’s commitment to making her way in life.

Zain’s writing is also a form of political resistance, as it resists the societies that enable the building of patriarchal control. With her creative project, Zain documents her own experiences and reflects upon the oppression of women to critique the cultural and institutional frameworks that maintain it. Her writing inspires other women, such as her cousin Fadila, who recalls Zain’s assertion that women have the right to divorce under Islamic law: “Zain said Islam gives women this option” (Samman, 2017, p. 52). Accordingly, Murfin (1996) states that “masculine desire dominates speech and posits woman as an idealised fantasy-fulfilment for the incurable emotional lack caused by separation from the mother”(p.462). Similarly, Asl (2018) states that, in documenting their stories, “the so-called passive women interrogate the totality of prevailing hierarchies of power” (p.194). What is so remarkable about Zain’s work is not only that she empowers herself, but that she empowers others to question and resist the confines of norms that restrict their freedom. It persuades her cousin Fadila to rethink the restrictions on her own life. The ripples of individual defiance serve to demonstrate broader sociological implications of individual defiance.

Zain’s writing has an empowering side that puts her on people’s radar for condemnation. Her husband, Waseem, whose entire life has been dedicated to rejecting anything that hints at intellectual pursuits, declares the actual cause of the split: “Those damned books of hers are the real reason we’re splitting up. They’ve ruined her mind” (Samman, 2017, p. 46). This proves to be a rejection of patriarchal fear of an educated woman who threatens the entire social order. But the fact that Zain persisted in writing despite these obstacles shows that she is resolute and would not be shut down by the challenge. Zain symbolises her opposition to the norms of patriarchy and her struggle against her otherness through her writing in *Farewell, Damascus* (2017). She uses her artistic expression to steal her voice out of the social construction to make the woman and a world that scorns her contribution quiet. But here, in this multimedia space, writing is a personal liberation but also a political action that enables Zain to critique and resist the roles that have been

imposed on her and also to stimulate others to do the same. Her path is not aligned with the individualistic appeals to freedom by intellectual opposition to the feminist ideas of de Beauvoir, hooks, and others. The novel demonstrates the gender equality and independence struggle via writing as a means of resistance and the contemporary cost and reward of writing to women.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the representation of rebellion and female agency in Ghada Samman's *Farewell, Damascus* (2017) through the existential feminist framework of Simone de Beauvoir, with three research questions guiding the analysis: how patriarchal structures construct women as Other within the novel; how Zain's rebellion reflects de Beauvoir's concept of transcendence; and what role writing plays as an existential and political act of feminist resistance. The findings of the analysis, conducted across three thematic and conceptual domains- marriage, female agency, and intellectual expression- are synthesised below in direct relation to these questions and to the theoretical framework established at the outset of the study.

In response to the first research question, the analysis demonstrates that *Farewell, Damascus* constructs patriarchal structures primarily through the institutions of marriage and family, which function as mechanisms of control that reduce Zain to the condition of de Beauvoir's Other, a being defined not by her own subjectivity but exclusively in relation to the men and social roles she is expected to serve. The analysis of the Marriage section reveals that the institution of marriage in the novel does not represent partnership but rather the systematic transfer of a woman from one form of dependency to another, confirming de Beauvoir's argument that patriarchal society confines women to the sphere of immanence by equating their identity with domestic and reproductive function. The Female Agency section further demonstrates that this construction of Otherness is enforced not only through external social pressure but through the internalised compliance of women themselves, particularly Zain's aunt, who reproduces patriarchal norms and presents them to younger women as natural and inevitable.

In response to the second research question, the analysis establishes that Zain's rebellion, specifically her decision to divorce Waseem, her rejection of compulsory motherhood, and her commitment to clandestine writing, constitute a sustained and philosophically coherent movement from immanence toward transcendence in de Beauvoir's terms. Each act of defiance analysed in the Rebellion section represents not merely a social refusal but an existential assertion: a conscious rejection of the identity imposed upon her by patriarchal structures and a deliberate claiming of her status as a self-determining subject. Crucially, the analysis also confirms de Beauvoir's warning that transcendence is neither easily achieved nor socially costless. Zain's rebellion is met with familial condemnation, social ostracism, and the active resistance of those around her, demonstrating that the movement from immanence to transcendence takes place in direct and sustained confrontation with the forces that seek to restore her to her assigned place.

In response to the third research question, the analysis of the Writing section demonstrates that Zain's act of secret writing functions simultaneously as a personal existential strategy and a political act of feminist resistance. Writing enables Zain to reclaim the voice that patriarchal society denies her, to construct a self-defined narrative in defiance of the narratives imposed upon her, and to exercise the intellectual agency that de Beauvoir identifies as essential to women's transcendence. The analysis further reveals that writing's significance in the novel extends beyond Zain's individual liberation: her literary expression also empowers others, as seen in the effect of

her arguments on her cousin Fadila, demonstrating that individual existential resistance can carry broader social implications for the contestation of patriarchal authority.

Taken together, these findings establish that rebellion in *Farewell, Damascus* (2017) operates on two simultaneous levels, as social resistance to specific patriarchal institutions and as existential self-definition in de Beauvoir's philosophical sense. The novel does not present liberation as a final destination achieved through a single act of defiance; rather, it portrays it as an ongoing process of becoming costly, contested, and incomplete, but philosophically significant as an assertion of female subjectivity against a social order designed to deny it. This study contributes to the growing body of scholarship that applies existential feminist theory to Arab literary contexts, demonstrating both the relevance of de Beauvoir's framework beyond Western literary traditions and the richness of *Farewell, Damascus* (2017) as a site of feminist philosophical inquiry that has not yet received the analytical attention it merits.

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