



Negotiating Power and Survival in *The Open Door*

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Abstract:

This paper examines the concepts of “counter-conduct” as articulated by Michel Foucault and “persistence” as proposed by Judith Butler to analyse the interplay between patriarchal power and women's resistance in Latifa al-Zayyat's work. Focusing on her novel *The Open Door*, the study investigates the character of Layla and her various strategies of dissent, highlighting her acts of counter-conduct and persistence. Through these actions, Layla navigates her oppressive surroundings and creates alternative modes of existence, which ultimately lead to a redefinition of her subjectivity and gender identity within a patriarchal framework. This analysis provides valuable insights into how women's resistance to authority can facilitate both personal growth and broader social change.

Key Words: Resistance, Counter-Conduct, Patriarchy, Women, Subjectivity.

Introduction

In a society shaped by patriarchal norms that elevate male authority while diminishing female voices, Egyptian women writers have emerged as crucial interrogators of these oppressive structures over the past sixty years. Through their literary works, they critically examine and challenge the prevailing rationalities that govern gender dynamics. These authors articulate the diverse ways in which women navigate and resist their

circumstances, emphasizing acts of counter-conduct and persistence that highlight their strength and agency. By reimagining established gender roles and presenting alternative narratives, they not only reveal the complexities of women's lived experiences but also advocate for transformative changes in societal perceptions of femininity.

This paper examines how Latifa al-Zayyat empowers her protagonist in *The Open Door* to break free from the constraints of patriarchy through various forms of resistance that amplify new truths and voices. Al-Zayyat skillfully utilizes the resources available to her character, enabling her to navigate and challenge the limitations imposed by a patriarchal society. The protagonist engages in a range of "everyday" acts of resistance, which, while seemingly ordinary, hold significant meaning and impact. By highlighting these commonplace acts, al-Zayyat illustrates the subtle yet powerful ways women can assert their agency and confront oppressive structures in their lives (Scott 16). While less overtly confrontational than armed rebellion, Scott argues that "everyday" acts still serve as forms of resistance. This paper contends that, in addition to directly challenging patriarchal dominance, the contestations of the protagonist Layla in Latifa al-Zayyat's *The Open Door* are analyzed, regardless of their scale or effectiveness. It reflects on Layla's varied and situational "everyday" acts of resistance, as well as her practices of counter-conduct and persistence in her quest to assert control over her life. To examine the dynamics between patriarchal power and women's resistance, the concepts of counter-conduct from Michel Foucault and persistence from Judith Butler are employed.

In *The Open Door*, the protagonist engages in various everyday acts of resistance, described as "low-profile techniques" (Scott 16) that often escape the notice of the patriarchal gender system. Despite their subtlety, these actions gradually undermine the unjust ideologies that uphold women's status quo. Rather than representing "grand refusals," Layla's resistance consists of "dispersed and shifting points of resistance" or forms of counter-conduct (Death 239) that challenge her circumstances in meaningful ways.

Analysing Latifa al-Zayyat's *The Open Door* through this dual approach enables a thorough exploration of the everyday forms of expression, discernible strategies of dissent, and acts of refusal present in the text. This framework allows for a rigorous evaluation of how Layla seeks to "escape direction by others" and "define the way ... to conduct [herself]" (Foucault, 1978, p. 259), ultimately forging new ways of being

that contribute to the development of her subjectivity and gender identity. Layla is not selected randomly; despite her unique experiences and the different contexts she navigates, she grapples with a common struggle against the restrictive boundaries imposed by oppressive traditions and social norms that uphold male supremacy and deny women their rights to autonomy in their lives.

This paper contributes to the understanding of Latifa al-Zayyat's work within the broader context of Egyptian women's literature, where discussions of everyday acts of resistance remain limited. While several texts address women's empowerment and agency, few delve into the subtleties of persistence and counter-conduct. For instance, Rasheed El-Enany's "The Madness of Non-Conformity: Woman versus Society in the Fiction of Salwā Bakr" (2006) explores themes of non-conformity, and Magda Al-Nowahi's "Resisting Silence in Arab Women's Autobiographies" (2001) focuses on voicelessness. These works do not specifically examine the nuanced forms of resistance in al-Zayyat's narratives. Thus, this study addresses a significant gap by focusing on the everyday resistance exemplified in *The Open Door*.

The study will first clarify Foucault's concept of "counter-conduct" alongside Butler's notion of "persistence," detailing how these frameworks will guide my analysis. Next, I will highlight how al-Zayyat effectively counters the portrayal of women as mere victims of male dominance through Layla's multifaceted acts of defiance. The concluding section will delve into how Layla's everyday forms of resistance serve as vital strategies for her survival and empowerment within a patriarchal context.

Foucault's concepts of power and counter-conduct significantly influence feminist politics and the broader discourse on women's resistance to authority. They also play a crucial role in Judith Butler's exploration of power dynamics and subject formation. In this context, I aim to highlight specific elements of Foucault's framework that Butler references in her advocacy for women's persistence. She characterizes persistence as a "force, figure, and concept" intertwined with themes of endurance, survival, defiance, willfulness, resistance, and flourishing, while also acknowledging its association with dead ends, social death, and the threat of extinction (2021 MLA Call for Participation).

Foucault conceptualizes power as "the multiplicity of force relations inherent in the sphere where they function, which also shape their organization" (1990, 92). He views power as omnipresent, localized, and

inherently unstable. Power dynamics operate throughout society, flowing in a capillary manner from the bottom up rather than descending from a central authority. Furthermore, resistance to power is inseparable from the notion of power itself, as they are interconnected within the same system. He explains that “there exists a diversity of resistances, each representing a unique scenario: some are possible, necessary, or improbable; others may be spontaneous, savage, solitary, collective, rampant, or even violent” (1990, 95-96). He identifies two essential components in any power dynamic: first, “the other,” which he describes as “the one over whom power is exercised,” and second, the “field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions” available to “the other” (1990, 220). This indicates that those subjected to power are actively engaged with those who wield it, establishing a reciprocal relationship. Consequently, power is not merely a repressive force; it circulates between both the powerful and the powerless, intertwining the roles of oppressor and oppressed. Foucault’s framework is particularly beneficial for feminist theory as it elucidates the various origins of women’s subjugation and highlights their everyday acts of resistance. Furthermore, he perceives power as a mode of conduct, explaining that it encompasses not only the act of directing others (*conduire*) but also how individuals conduct themselves, allow themselves to be guided, and ultimately behave as a consequence of these interactions (Foucault 1978, 259).

Foucault emphasizes that conduct involves both how individuals navigate their own behaviors and how they are directed by others, suggesting that these elements are deeply interconnected. In his lectures on Security, Territory, Population (1977-1978), he defines counter-conduct as the active resistance against the methods employed to govern individuals (1978, 268). He clarifies that counter-conduct transcends simple disobedience; it is not a complete rejection of governance but rather a desire for a different form of guidance that allows individuals to exercise autonomy in their lives. This notion of counter-conduct expresses a refusal to be governed in specific ways and seeks alternative leadership, goals, and methods for achieving personal salvation (Foucault 2007, 72). Foucault identifies various modes of counter-conduct, including asceticism, community-building, mysticism, and truth-telling (*parrēsia*), all of which aim to disrupt and challenge existing power structures within systems of obedience and truth (1978, 271). These dynamics highlight that women can occupy both positions of power and subordination within multiple hierarchical systems. As silenced and marginalized individuals actively engage in self-work and confront power, they can initiate meaningful

change, creating pathways to a more empowered future. In Butler's exploration of these concepts, she applies Foucault's theories to gender, positing that gender is a performative construct shaped through repeated actions and societal norms. This view portrays gender identity as fluid and contingent, rather than fixed, allowing for new avenues of agency and resistance to emerge. As noted by Wijitbusaba Marome, the potential for resistance expands as individuals identify strategies for subversive repetition, enabling them to assert their identities in ways that challenge dominant power structures (2005, 122).

Butler views power as a dynamic force that influences all social relationships, aligning with Foucault's assertion that power has inherent "productive effects" (2004, 41). She interprets norms as tools of power that shape what types of subjects, lives, practices, and actions are culturally recognized and understood. In this framework, Butler argues that women's ability to persist is contingent upon these norms; essentially, women's agency is derived from their capacity to navigate within the parameters set by these norms (2004, 32). Moreover, she emphasizes that the act of persisting in one's identity necessitates engagement with processes of recognition—both receiving and granting it (2004, 31). Without norms that facilitate recognition, Butler contends that it becomes impossible for individuals to maintain their existence or identity; without such norms, they are rendered "impossible beings," cut off from potential (2004, 31). Therefore, subjection to these norms of recognition is crucial for women's survival and persistence as individuals. In summary, both Foucault and Butler highlight the potential for action and resistance through the navigation of the underlying power dynamics in everyday interactions and routine behaviors. Women, along with other marginalized groups, often lack the resources or opportunities for direct confrontation with patriarchal structures. Instead, they employ subtle and indirect methods aimed at challenging and undermining the social norms and cultural beliefs that seek to confine them.

Defying Boundaries: Latifa al-Zayyat's Portrayal of Resistance and Liberation

Latifa al-Zayyat, a prominent Egyptian activist, novelist, critic, and academic, made significant contributions to challenging dominant gender norms and exposing the systemic oppression of women. Through her literary and critical works, she not only critiqued patriarchy but also portrayed acts of resistance, counter-conduct, and perseverance in her characters. Al-Zayyat's novel *The Open Door* is particularly notable for its exploration of the parallel struggles of both Egypt and its protagonist, Layla. Set between 1946 and

1956, the story chronicles Layla's personal battle against societal expectations, gender restrictions, and family-imposed limitations, while simultaneously reflecting Egypt's broader fight for independence from imperial control. In this narrative, al-Zayyat intertwines the personal and political, demonstrating how Layla's journey toward self-liberation mirrors Egypt's national quest for freedom. As Hoda Elsada points out, the novel establishes a direct connection between the private and public spheres, with Layla's struggle against traditional gender roles symbolizing the nation's resistance to colonialism and exploitation (2012, 102). Through this, al-Zayyat positions herself as a key figure in portraying both personal and national resistance.

Despite their diverse social, political, and economic backgrounds, many writers share a common understanding that echoes Judith Butler's idea that "persistence in a condition of vulnerability proves to be its own kind of strength" (2020, 137). Latifa al-Zayyat, in particular, exemplifies this in her portrayal of women who challenge patriarchal power structures by choosing alternative paths of resistance. Through her characters, al-Zayyat dismantles dominant cultural, political, and religious norms by allowing them to navigate their circumstances in unique ways—whether through quiet defiance, subtle negotiation, or outright rebellion. Her protagonists actively subvert these oppressive frameworks, resisting authority at every level, from the control of fathers and husbands to societal and governmental power. In this way, al-Zayyat's work highlights the strength found in vulnerability and the power in breaking traditional boundaries.

In *The Open Door*, Layla faces a series of intense confrontations with the dominant ideologies of her society. Initially, she gives in to these pressures, which leads her to feel trapped within her own home. Reflecting on her situation, she describes womanhood as stepping into a kind of prison, where the boundaries of her life were sharply and unmistakably defined. Standing guard at this metaphorical prison door were her father, her brother, and her mother, all reinforcing the restrictions placed upon her (al-Zayyat 2002, 24). Layla's sense of entrapment intensifies as she begins to see herself not just as confined, but as dehumanized, referring to herself as "a slave, nothing but a jariya! A jariya in the slave market!" (41). Her rebellion against these constraints begins when she defies the rigid expectations of her family and participates in the student demonstrations against British occupation. This act of defiance is met with harsh punishment from her father, who physically disciplines her by removing her shoes and striking her with a slipper, each hit landing on her legs and back. As the slipper "hit against her legs and then her back" (51), the only words she could hear were

“shut up!”—a command that symbolized the oppressive silence imposed on her. For years, she remains figuratively silent, trapped in the expectations of her family and society. However, through her gradual awakening, she ultimately finds the strength to break this silence, reclaim her autonomy, and unlock new possibilities for herself. This journey not only reflects Layla’s personal transformation but also symbolizes the broader struggle for freedom and agency against oppressive forces.

In *The Open Door*, Latifa al-Zayyat powerfully illustrates the intertwining of personal and national struggles, using Layla’s journey of self-liberation as a metaphor for Egypt’s fight for independence. Layla’s progression from submission to rebellion exemplifies the resilience found in vulnerability and the strength of resistance against patriarchal and societal oppression. By breaking her silence and reclaiming her autonomy, Layla becomes a symbol of both personal and collective empowerment. Al-Zayyat’s work, thus, transcends the individual narrative, offering a broader commentary on the enduring fight for freedom and justice. Through Layla, al-Zayyat captures the essence of resistance and the transformative power of perseverance.

Navigating Patriarchy: Layla's Path to Self-Discovery through Community

In *The Open Door*, Layla's acts of resistance and rebellion against the power figures that impede her personal development and Egypt's journey toward independence reveal her struggle against a constraining patriarchal system. Her persistence and flourishing manifest as she transforms her relationship with herself and the people around her. By engaging with various "communities" at different stages of her life, Layla actively negates the limited roles of subjectivity imposed on her by patriarchal ideology.

Judith Butler posits that flourishing requires certain "provisions" and "principles" to organize social and civic life (2020, 48). However, as the daughter of a conservative middle-class family, Layla finds many of these provisions blocked. She is ensnared in a traditional patriarchal authority, characterized by rigid familial and social constraints that subjugate and victimize women. Her father's oppressive control is particularly notable; he states, “Layla, you must realize that you have grown up. From now on you are absolutely not to go out by yourself. No visits. Straight from home to school” (24). This directive is emblematic of the authoritarian familial environment in which Layla is trapped, offering her no opportunity for self-expression or autonomy. Moreover, Layla grapples with confusion about societal expectations, as she struggles to discern

what constitutes "proper" behavior. A moment of genuine laughter might be deemed "improper" (25), while any candid remark risks being labeled "out of bounds" (25)—the limits of acceptable conduct defined by her mother, who aims to enhance Layla's desirability in the marriage market. This internal conflict reflects the broader tension between individual identity and societal norms, underscoring the profound impact of patriarchal structures on women's self-perception and agency.

Layla faces oppression not only from her father but also from her headmistress, who, like Layla's mother, upholds strict gender roles. The headmistress clearly delineates women's positions in society, stating, "women's job was motherhood.... Woman's place was in the home. ... Weapons and fighting were for men" (48). This rigid adherence to patriarchal norms compels Layla to perceive herself as a mere object, devoid of agency or control over her own life. In a moment of deep sorrow, she reflects, "Wrong. Yes, indeed, I was wrong. I showed what I felt as if I were a real human being. I forgot. I forgot that I'm not a person; I'm only a girl. A woman. Yes, I forgot" (56). This admission reveals her internal struggle and the profound impact of societal expectations on her sense of identity.

Layla finds herself torn between the conformist expectations imposed by her father, mother, and headmistress, and her own rebellious spirit, which is fueled by the national struggle for independence. The stirring reports of demonstrations in Cairo invigorate her sense of agency and purpose. As she actively participates in the student protests, she experiences a profound sense of liberation; these moments create opportunities for her to redefine herself as an active subject rather than a passive object. Within this framework, the demonstrations embody what Foucault describes as "communities" that possess a "counter-society aspect," challenging existing social relations and hierarchies (1978, 279). Through this engagement, Layla not only asserts her individuality but also aligns herself with a larger movement for social change.

Amidst the throng of protestors, Layla experienced a profound sense of vitality, feeling as though she had transformed into "one of those birds circling above" (50). She was swept up in the collective energy of the crowd, "melting into the whole," where the atmosphere was charged with support and momentum—"everything around her was propelling her forward" (51). This newfound solidarity surrounded her, offering a sense of safety and belonging she had longed for.

In this vibrant community, Layla discovered her voice—a powerful emergence that startled her. She began to shout, her cries echoing with a resonance that felt foreign yet liberating, a “voice that belonged to someone else” (51). It was as if this sound connected her past self to her envisioned future, intertwining with the collective spirit of the thousands around her—“faces, faces as far as she could see” (50-51). In that moment, Layla was not merely a participant; she was part of something larger, something transformative.

In the narrative landscape of *The Open Door*, Layla's voice becomes a powerful emblem of her newfound presence and self-expression, marking her transformation into a conscious, intentional being. This voice signifies the awakening of her subjectivity—a breakthrough that allows her to step beyond the confines of a stifling existence. The third-person narrator illustrates this pivotal moment, depicting how the crowd envelops her: “[b]ehind her the crowd pushed forward ... pushing her further from her father, his face very dark indeed, and away from the image of her mother, her lips even paler now. Her father vanished from sight and she saw only the crowds of thousands, and herself melting into the whole” (51).

In this throng, Layla does not merely exist; she *comes alive*, feeling as if an “intense, concentrated beam of light had pierced her body to settle inside” (60). This vibrant experience is not just a fleeting moment of exhilaration; it marks a significant shift in her identity, a departure from the constraints that have held her captive. Yet, it's crucial to recognize that *The Open Door* defies the typical bildungsroman narrative arc. Instead of a straightforward coming-of-age tale, we observe Layla's evolution into a robust character, only to witness the tragic reversion to silence and despair after her father's brutal assault. Stripped of her subjectivity and agency, she resigns herself to the harsh reality of her existence, lamenting her fate as “just a mat. A doormat for shoes” (55). This poignant imagery encapsulates her profound disempowerment, leaving her to grapple with the stark contrast between her moments of empowerment and the oppressive weight of her familial ties.

As Layla transitioned into university life, the discourse surrounding women's roles underwent a significant transformation. During a lecture delivered by an officer from the National Guard, he extolled “the value of women” and proclaimed the arrival of “true equality,” emphasizing that women were finally granted “the right to defend the nation.” This shift symbolized the opening of “the door” for female students eager to

enlist in the National Guard (246, 247). Embracing this new opportunity, Layla began to feel the resurgence of emotions she thought she had lost, realizing that she was “capable and strong after all” (249).

Her involvement in the National Guard fostered a sense of collective responsibility and belonging, weaving her into the fabric of national identity. The turning point in her journey came during the bombings in Port Said, where she remained for work-related reasons. In this turmoil, a powerful realization stirred within her, described by the narrator as “something vast springing from deep within, something new and powerful that would not leave her be” (339). This awakening ignited an inner strength that propelled her towards a rebirth of self. By the end of the novel, we find Layla embracing herself, “stretch[ing] her hands around her shoulders, hugging herself, quieting the surge of love and pride and confidence that swept over her body” (352).

The popular resistance movement operates like any “community,” possessing the ability to forge a different societal structure and redirect acts of rebellion into manageable forces (Foucault 1978, 266-67). Within this collective, the notion of “being conducted otherwise” gains political significance, allowing Layla to better understand her position within a patriarchal society. By actively participating in the Resistance, she not only redefines her relationship with the world but also her sense of agency. When she finally recognizes her power—“that she had worked her will, and that she could always do it again” (249)—she asserts to her brother, “I’m not leaving.” Her voice, now imbued with newfound strength, seems “strange” and marked by a tone that reflects absolute determination, devoid of conciliatory undertones or anger (342-43).

Layla steps beyond the confines of her family and the limitations of her previous self, entering a broader sphere where “no one could keep her back” (343). This transformation illustrates how “communities” empower her to navigate her vulnerabilities, liberate herself from paternalistic constraints, and access new horizons, ultimately unlocking her full potential as an autonomous individual. From Butler’s perspective, Layla has worked tirelessly to assert her own existence, enhancing her journey of self-preservation and growth. She now stands at the threshold of persistence and flourishing, equipped with the means to shape her destiny.

Conclusion:

In this paper, I argued that Layla, a protagonist in Latifa al-Zayyat's narratives, actively engages in acts of resistance and counter-conduct, reflecting her negotiation of power dynamics within a patriarchal society. Through her experiences, Layla exemplifies how women navigate and challenge societal norms. By enacting different modes of counter-conduct—such as community-building, asceticism, and parrēsia—she not only resists oppressive structures but also reshapes her relationships with patriarchal figures, thereby opening new avenues for agency and action. Al-Zayyat's portrayal of Layla underscores that patriarchal power is not absolute; it is contested and vulnerable to challenge. The diverse expressions of resistance exhibited by Layla demonstrate her ability to persist and carve out space for her voice in a society that often seeks to silence women. By articulating her frustrations and advocating for freedom, justice, and equality, Layla embodies a persistent struggle against oppression. Ultimately, al-Zayyat expands our understanding of women's resilience in the Egyptian context through Layla's character, illustrating that acts of resistance, whether subtle or overt, contribute significantly to the broader discourse on gender and power. Layla's journey invites readers to recognize the importance of these struggles in the fight for women's agency and empowerment.

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