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Place and the (trans) formation of self-identity in Ezzedine Fishere's *Farah's Story*

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Abstract Place is a field that is related to various disciplines like geography, sociology, psychology, environment and literature among others. In this interdisciplinary study, place attachment and place identity and their correlation with self –identity (its formation and transformation) are being traced to reveal that similar to real life powerful place experiences that influence one's identity, literary place experiences have deep ramifications on a literary work's characters. Borrowing theories from geography and Social Psychology, Edward Relph's phenomenology of place with its vast array of levels of insideness and outsideness, together with Glynis Breakwell's Identity Process Theory are employed to closely follow Ezzedine Fishere's Farah in his latest literary production *Farah's Story* (2021). Although Farah's childhood attachment to place form her conformant identity, later powerful place experiences transform her into an iron-willed rebellious woman who rejects all forms of attachment or authority.

Keywords Phenomenology of place · Insideness · Outsideness · Place identity · Self -identity

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Introduction

Place is important in literature not just as the setting where actions and events take place. It goes beyond that to influence the plot, characters and themes. The importance of place in literature varies according to the writer; consider Ernest Hemingway's place as offering meaning and refuge for example, or William Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County, However, this paper is not going to tackle place as one element of literature, rather, place is going to be the major focus of the study: how place influences its inhabitants, how writers anchor themselves and their characters to different places and the significant ramifications of this rooting and uprooting on characters and events. This interdisciplinary study examined the literature in place identity and its connection to self-identity. The research question is: how do powerful experiences of place (trans)form self-identity. The study is going to adopt a humanistic geographical theoretical framework to discuss the complex relationship between place and identity, more specifically Edward Relph's "phenomenology of place." Moreover, another theory that is germane to the present study is Breakwell's Identity Process Theory which generally views identity not as a static entity but a dynamic process. *Farah's Story* (2021) by Ezzedine Fishere, though rich in individualist feminism, will be approached through the intrinsic relation between place and self-identity by adopting Relph's "phenomenology of place" and Breakwell's Identity Process

Theory. This relating of literature to geography will strengthen the interdisciplinarity between the two fields in the hope of shedding more light on how human experiencing of place might provide better understanding of how humans interact with their surroundings and how these surroundings impact their lives.

Review of the literature

Beginning in the early 1970s, geographers such as Yi-Fu Tuan (1974) and Edward Relph (1976, 1985, 2009) were unsatisfied with what they sensed as a limited definition of place: "What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place when we endow it with value" (Tuan, 1977, p. 6). These thinkers were trying to achieve understanding of the human world by studying relations of people with nature, their geographical behavior and their feelings and ideas in regard to space and place (Tuan, 1974). Humanistic geography is a comprehensive understanding of human environment relationships that must consider individual and group experiences and meanings of space, place, landscape, region, mobility and related geographic phenomena (Johnston, 1979). This subfield of geography's basic feature is regarding man as a thinking being not a dehumanized respondent to stimuli in some mechanical way. Nonetheless, humanistic geography was accused of being essentialist in uncritically assuming an unchanging, universal human condition that ignored individual and group diversity including gender and economic, cultural and social differences. It was also accused of presupposing an implicit masculinist bias that assumed academically trained men (mostly) could understand all other people's situations. Humanistic geography defended its premises by arguing that it recognized human differences and sought conceptual and methodological ways for thoroughly engaging with the uniqueness of individuals and groups. Tuan (1974) concluded that every person is a biological being, a social being and a unique individual and that landscape is a repository of symbolic meaning (p. 11). Taking this point further Malpas concludes that. "It is through our engagement with place that our own human being is made real, but it is also through our engagement that place takes on a sense and a significance of its own" (Malpas, 2009, p. 23). In this respect, place cannot be regarded as just a physical location where events take place, but it should be considered as an integral part of human experience; this entails that "subjectivist" and "psychological" approaches should be used side by side with the "physical" approach in understanding the concept of place: "place is not founded on subjectivity, but it is rather that on which subjectivity is founded" (Malpas, 1999, p. 35).

Of special interest to this paper is Edward Relph's book *Place and Placelessness* (1976) which was originally his 1973 Toronto University doctoral dissertation in Geography. His research method is "phenomenology of place" (pp. 4–7) which is the interpretive study of human experience. Phenomenology, generally, is studying and inquiring the taken-for –granted attitudes and assumptions toward a certain object of direct experience. It is usually things closest to us and are most familiar that tend to be overlooked and forgotten. Although Relph says that there are various types and depths of spatial experience, he draws a heuristic structure grounded in "a continuum that has direct experience at one extreme and abstract thought at the other…" (Relph, 1976, p. 9). In very simple words he distinguishes between existential space perceived by the body and instincts, and abstract space perceived intangibly by the mind. Relph initially identified an identity of place whereby we can identify particular place experiences in terms of the intensity of meaning and intention that a person and place hold for each other. For Relph, the epitome of this lived intensity is identity with place, which he defines through the concept of insideness—the degree of attachment, involvement, and concern that a person or group has for a particular place (Relph, 1976, p. 141). The more the intensity of insideness an individual feels in a place, the more secure, safe, enclosed and at ease, and thus, leading to a stronger identity with the place. On the other hand, when an individual experiences separation or alienation between themselves and the world, Relph calls this mode of place outsideness. This ebb and flow of insideness and outsideness makes people experience places differently and, as a result, yield different feelings, meanings and actions. So, if what Relph calls existential insideness is the top of the spectrum of identity with place, existential outsideness comes at the bottom. The strongest sense of existential insideness is experienced when an individual is at home within their own community feeling deep, unself conscious immersion in place.

Place identity

PROSHANSKY et al. (1983) defined place identity as.

> broadly conceived, cognitions about the physical world in which the individual lives. These cognitions represent memories, ideas, feelings, attitudes, values, preferences, meanings, and conceptions of behavior and experience, which relate to the variety and complexity of physical settings that define the day-to-day existence of every human being. At the core of such physical environment-related cognitions is the "environmental past" of the person; a past consisting of places, spaces and their properties which have served instrumentally in the satisfaction of the person's biological, psychological, social, and cultural needs (p. 59)

There is a close connection between who we were and who we might become on the one hand and where we were and where we might go. The degree of significance and meaningfulness of a place to its inhabitants and users contribute in the conceptualization of the self. As one's self- identity adapts to changing social and environmental conditions, so does relationship with place.

Identity Process Theory was chosen for this study because it appropriately relates identity to place: "IPT Identity Process Theory proposes that the individual's identity is a dynamic social product of the interaction of the capacities for memory, consciousness and organized construal with the physical and societal structures and influence processes which constitute the social context" (Breakwell, 2001, p. 6.3). Breakwell (1986, 1992, 1993, 2010) proposed that identity change is negotiated through three processes: that of "identity assimilation (maintaining self-consistency), identity accommodation (making changes in the self), and identity balance (maintaining a sense of self but changing when necessary)." Currently in a globalized world culture, Identity Process is governed by four prime guidance principles: desire for continuity, distinctiveness, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. These four principles may vary not only over time and across situations but developmentally across the lifespan (Breakwell, 2001, p. 6.4). Powerful experiences of place, for instance, especially in the early years shape the self and contribute in identity formation. Moreover, the physical environment can be used as a strategy to form, maintain or change of identity (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). Based on Breakwell's Identity Process Theory, Farah's Story is going to show how place determines the dynamicity of self-identity and how it forms and reforms all the way as long as human beings interact with their surroundings.

Place attachment and formation of childhood self-identity

The novel under study *Farah's Story* (2021) was written by the Egyptian writer and former diplomat Ezzedine Fishere in Arabic. Although the title mentions the name of one woman, Farah, the plot interweaves the stories of three women: Zeinab the grandmother; Farah, the mother and Zeina, the daughter / granddaughter. The narration flows smoothly through the writing of Zeina who is getting the information about her mother, Farah from her mother's diaries and her grandmother's recordings. Fishere crafted a story about a simple family from Mansoura, Egypt in the 1970s when the father leaves for a better job opportunity in Kuwait causing his family drastic financial and social problems. Zeinab is left to bring her children alone facing the relentless pitiful / gloating looks of her relatives and neighbors. She is determined to bring them up as distinctive, fine young men and women who stand out among their peers. Her daughter Farah follows her mother's lead in bringing up her only daughter Zeina, but with less intervention and control than did Zeinab.

Although on a surface reading the novel seems about the oppression a woman undergoes in the Egyptian society as a girl, or a married woman, or a divorcee or a single mother, a closer reading of the novel uncovers a deeper level of influence that helps in the (re)formation of self-identity: that of place. Nowhere in the novel are the characters ever separated from their surroundings that are constantly (re) shaping their lives.

The plot is cyclical; it starts and ends with what Edward Relph calls "fields of care." As Relph (1976) noted," The places to which we are most attached are literally fields of care, settings in which we have had a multitude of experiences and which call forth a complex array of affections and responses.…There is, in fact, a complete commitment to that place, a

commitment that is as profound as any that a person can make" (p. 38). The story opens with Zeina sitting in a café in Lebanon, Pennsylvania, USA, a small town that she loves for its quietness, natural beauty, proximity of all vital places and its nice people: "This absolute peacefulness absorbed my stress, as if the oxygen that filled my lungs cleansed my soul from the residues of the past" (Fishere, 2021, p.9, this and the subsequent quotations from the novel are my translation). In this peaceful place reflected in her state of mind, Zeina narrates how she was informed of her mother Farah's death two weeks earlier and how the reception of her mother's dairies encouraged her to write a novel based on her mother's life. The reader then understands that Zeina is living with a man named Adam and has adopted a little girl called Elissa. It is on the American soil that Zeina knew what she wanted: to become a medical student, to write a novel about her mother and grandmother, to form a family and adopt a child. These decisions were impossible to be taken on the Egyptian soil despite the fact that her mother, Farah, gave her the freedom to lead her life the way she wanted.

The second chapter moves back five years in time from 2019 to 2014, and moves from Lebanon, USA to Giza, Egypt. The narrator now is Farah who, through her diaries, is bombarding the reader with decisions such as: "pull the house down, end my love story, get rid of my mother, kidnap a bride and kill a child" (Fishere, 2021, p.12). At the beginning the reader might think how wicked of her to take such decisions, but as the story unfolds, the reader understands that all these are for everyone's best interest. The execution of these decisions, infiltrated by flashbacks, takes up the whole story. The reader is first introduced to Farah as lying in bed, suffering from uterine bleeding, having no energy to move a limb, let alone carry out these drastic decisions. According to Relph (1976) a place can range in scale from a furnishing or room to a building, neighborhood, city, landscape, or region. Farah's bed at this point in her life, a middle-aged divorcee, is a comfortable one for her, unlike the one she chose when she was getting married to her husband, Ehab: "I rented the apartment that I liked, bought a large bed with a comfortable back, and furnished the apartment minimally for a place with a sleek look; I furnished all of it according to my taste and with nobody's intervention" (Fishere, 2021, p.16). Farah's cognition of her physical surroundings influences her attitude towards her husband and she relates her physical discomfort with her old bed to her discomfort in her relationship with her husband: "The damn brass bed with its cold pricking back has gone, so has Ehab with his suffocating presence; his cold, belittling smirk; his all-knowing nod of the head; his manipulating look permitting, forbidding, denouncing, bidding and halting; his bent head proudly waiting for gratitude; his hateful breath in my face while sleeping and while awake" (Fishere, 2021, p.17). Farah's "environmental past" with Ehab brings about undesirable memories, feelings and physical / emotional experiences.

The narration then rewinds in a flashback to Mansoura, Egypt, in 1971 when Farah was a little child still wetting the bed. Farah still remembers how shaken she was in her cold wet clothes afraid of getting punished. However, Zeinab, her mother, reassures her by tenderly hugging her and patting her shoulder. Then comes the long cleaning process of changing bed sheets and cleaning the mattress, and giving Farah a bath by preparing some hot water in a pot and mixing it with cold water, a process that was both confusing physically and emotionally to Farah. When complaining the water was too hot or too cold, Zeinab sometimes mellows and hugs her girl, and at other times loses her temper and beats the girl with a hose in the bathroom. Farah feels both insideness and outsideness at the same time and this is what causes her confusion: "Zeinab tucks me back into bed, kisses me, covers and pats me and I'm confused of all those feelings, yearning for nothing as much as for this never to happen again" (Fishere, 2021, p.31).

As stated earlier, this study adopts Relph's "phenomenology of place", an approach that "[b]y eliciting participants' essential, powerful experiences as they specifically occurred in the context of place, phenomenology offers a way of uncovering knowledge through the immediate engagement with phenomena" (Stern, 2016, p. 84). As phenomenology turns attention from an objective third-person perspective to a subjective first-person perspective, it offers a deeper essence of the experience of place and self. In the third and longest chapter, Farah describes her last journey to Mansoura to pull her family's house down and how she feels about the road: "I hate this road, and I love it from all my heart. I hate its chaos, unplanned artificial bumps, the reckless drivers who assume they are driving mules in the field and

not 120 km/hr. metal- box vehicles, its coarse traffic patrols with the investigating looks of their attendants. And I love it; I love these remaining trees and their leaves touching the parallel canal; I love its dust and the odor of the fields; I love its mist in the morning that brings me back every time to my childhood; I love the smell of burnt hay and bricks, the sound of frogs and crickets; I love its bends and the greenery all around... (Fishere, 2021, p. 35). A little later she confesses: "Actually I lost the feeling of love that I used to have toward this city and its road because of the savagery that devoured them" (Fishere, 2021, p. 36). The feeling of insideness and outsideness in response to Farah's sense of place has to do with her sense of self and identity. Farah who used to love the city and its road is now a different Farah hating the place and wishing to destroy the whole of it. This transformation in her sense of place is intrinsically related to the transformation in her identity, a point that will be tackled later in the study.

Hernandez et al., (2007) suggested that place attachment precedes the formation of place identity, and thus, place attachment is an affective bond that people establish with specific areas where they prefer to remain and where they feel comfortable and safe. Place identity, however, has been defined as a component of personal identity, a process by which, through interaction with places, people describe themselves in terms of belonging to a specific place (Hernandez et al., 2007, p. 310, Bernardo and Oliveira, 2013, p. 37). Unfortunately for Farah, her home town, Mansoura, was never a place for her to be attached to. It was never intended for Farah's family to live in Mansoura; on the contrary, Hussein, the father, promised Zeinab that he will work in Kuwait for a few years and with his savings he will build an electronics factory and a house for the family in the midst of a mango farm in Ismailia. Hussein, after a few years, sends telling her he lost all his savings to a conman and that she had to bear a little longer with him until he can stand up again on his feet. Devastated, Zeinab decides to move out of her father's house in the village and go to live independently with her children in Mansoura.

Farah's childhood was characterized by poverty, deprivation and prohibition. Zeinab could barely make ends meet, so there was never extra money to give to her children to buy sweets or toys. The apartment they rented in Mansoura was very small: 65 square meters including living room, three bedrooms, a kitchen and a bathroom. Farah remembers she never had a new toy; all her toys were either broken or incomplete. Proshansky (1983) proposed that the development of self-identity extends to objects and things, and the very spaces and places in which they are found. If the child learns 'who he is' by virtue of his relationship with those who satisfy his needs by taking care of him, then it follows that contributing to that same self-knowledge are the toys, clothes, rooms, and whole array of physical things and settings that also satisfy and support his existence (p. 57). Farah was most of the time prohibited from playing in the street because it was too dangerous for a girl to mingle with boys. Farah was allowed, for instance, to play with her bullying neighbor, Tamer, but was not allowed to play with his tender brother, Amin. A powerful place experience occurred to Farah when she was riding with Amin on his bike in spite of her mother's warning not to play with him; they trip and fall off the bike with Farah falling head down in an open sink sewer and losing her dress in the process. Farah was severely beaten by her mother and locked in a room for three days.

Farah did not have many happy memories of her childhood except only two. The first one was spending their summer nights on the roof when her father came in short visits. They would take dinner up to the roof and eat, and then spend the night watching the stars and sleeping in cool summer air. The second one was when she was riding the car with her parents in Ismailia and Farah leaning with her head between them: "This was the moment of utmost peacefulness and security with my parents throughout my whole life" (Fishere, 2021, p. 115). However, her father was hot-tempered and most of her memories about him are of violent images of shouting and throwing things at his wife and children. Knez (2005, 2014) suggested that during early childhood place attachment is formed due to emotional processing with place, while in adolescence this attachment develops into a place identity that is constructed through cognitive recognition of place. Her rare joyous memories did not formulate a strong attachment to place when she was a child, let alone as a young adult.

Place and the process of identity transformation

Identity Process Theory is applicable to powerful experiences of place that lead to identity transformation because it advocates for the relationship between identity and place. Breakwell proposed that sense of self or identity should be conceptualized as a living process dynamically moving through time and developing through social, physical, and other contexts (Timotijevic & Breakwell, 2000; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). In Identity Process theory, the self undergoes change through behavioral responses that (a) maintain consistency through identity assimilation and thus are known to the identity, (b) make changes to the self through identity accommodation and are unknown to the identity, and (c) balance the self by changing when necessary, thereby balancing the identity. Identity Process Theory points out the significance of dynamically situated context for identity construction, continuity, and malleability (Stern, 2017, pp. 188–189; Oyserman et al. 2012).

One of the guiding principles of Identity Process Theory is the desire for distinctiveness. Zeinab had always tried to bring her three children up to be refined young people despite the financial insecure status of the family. Thus, Farah and her two brothers grew up to classify people into two categories: refined and "people of the street." To be refined for Zeinab had nothing to do with money or the profession of the parents; it had to do with appearance and behavior: "Clean, well-dressed, well-behaved, educated and with good morals, these are the five pillars of being a refined person for Zeinab" (Fishere, 2021, pp. 44–45). When Zeinab comes back from Kuwait, she takes meticulous care that her children are distinct from others to the extent that they have become known as "Zeinab's children:" "She carefully sustained her children's distinctiveness: their cleanliness, their being well-dressed, their behavior against their village peers... Nobody else wears these clothes, or puts on shoes for the village dust roads, or takes a bath every week, or never eats with their hands or swears or plays in the mud; nobody wears white ironed shirts and shorts but them" (Fishere, 2021, p. 74). This was Zeinab's strategy to compensate not having her husband come back with her from Kuwait, and not bringing back their valued belongings.

The second guiding principle is the desire to preserve continuity of the self- concept. Places act as referents to past identities, so, maintaining a link with past places means securing a sense of continuity to past identity (Korpela, 1989, p. 251). When the middle- aged Farah comes to pull the house down, her memories of her room does not make her task any easier: "I feel as if my life is dust atoms stuck in this room; in this little bed, on this strangely designed desk, in this featureless wardrobe, in the pleats of this cheap orange curtain. How can four different objects carry all those levels of feelings?... I don't want this yearning anymore... Everything that crossed my mind or my heart was reflected on this curtain and that bed. What do prison inmates do when they leave their cells? Do they yearn for its walls or do they wish it destroyed? (Fishere, 2021, pp. 118–120). Farah, unwillingly, wants to sever her relation with her past identity represented in her old bedroom. Contrary to the normal desire of preserving continuity of the self-concept, Farah is resolute in her decision to destroy her childhood house that helped construct her past self-concept.

The third guiding principle for Identity Process Theory is self-esteem which means the positive evaluation of oneself and a desire to maintain a feeling of worth or social value. Stets and Burke (2014) relate self-esteem to self-efficacy, "self-esteem has three dimensions: self-worth, self-efficacy, and authenticity." They conclude that the dimension of self- worth comes from the judgments internalized from others, positive judgements in particular. This feeling of self-worth will guarantee our communion and connectedness to our society and will enhance our sense of belongingness. Leary et al. (1995)'s sociometer theory of esteem states that self- esteem acts as an interpersonal monitor (sociometer) that warns individuals when they are at risk of being excluded by others (Leary et al. 1995). When belongingness in a group is threatened, the sociometer signals an alarm that motivates individuals to behave in a way that gains and maintains acceptance from others. As a child, Farah was more than once threatened by her mother if she does not comply with the regulations of not mingling with boys, she will be one of the outcasts of society who are rejected and treated as pariahs. This fear of rejection drives Farah to keep quiet at any wrongdoing in order to avoid punishment, rejection and exclusion.

The fourth and last Identity Process Theory principle is self-efficacy; meaning "an individual's belief

in their capabilities to meet situational demands" (Twigger, 208). In Stern's dissertation, participants in their attempt to describe the experiences that shaped their sense of self-efficacy used words like: "discovery, adventure, exploration, escape from self-limits, learning, improvisation, as well as aspirating, testing, bridging, and overcoming" (194). If Farah was given the chance to describe her experience, she would never have used these words. At school she describes how she managed to survive: "I collaborated with the form of relationship forced on me; they dictate me information I should study by heart and instructions I should abide by. I did that to be a good student" (Fishere, 2021, p. 125). At this point, Farah confesses, "I had not the slightest bit of rebellion in me" (Fishere, 2021, p. 125). The social milieu, whether at home or at school, was suffocating, restricting and, in short, child unfriendly. Farah lived all her childhood since she was five until she was almost eighteen limited in the formation of her identity by the strictness of her mother at home and the orthodox, uncreative techniques of learning and behaving at school.

Breakwell's (1986) Identity Process Theory was designed to examine threats to identity. A threat to identity occurs when the processes of assimilation-accommodation are unable, for some reason, to comply with the principles of continuity, distinctiveness, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. Threats are aversive and the individual will seek to reinstitute the principled operation of the identity processes. For a threat to evoke action, it must gain access to consciousness. Any activity, in thought or deed, which has as its goal the removal or modification of a threat to identity can be regarded as a coping strategy (Breakwell, 2010, p. 6.5). Here, a distinction between the two sides of self-differentiation should be noted: A person with a poorly differentiated self is heavily dependent on the acceptance and approval of others, resulting in accommodating or controlling responses and self-adjustments toward appeasing others or pressuring them to conform. Conversely, a well self-differentiated self is able, in the face of challenge, criticism, or conflict, to maintain a balance between emotion and intellect, while still being able to maintain one's own feelings, perceptions, thoughts, values, and beliefs, inclusive of outside forces or external influences (Bowen, 1985).

As a child, Farah was conformant and quiet, "Doing the chores asked of me inside and outside the house, respecting the elders and pitying the younger, accepting what I get with gratitude without asking for more, not asking for anything, even when needing something and my mother says we couldn't afford it, I willingly accept her decision without bitterness... I don't know where I got all that submission, but it enabled me to avoid bitterness all my life. When then did I become a bitch?" (Fishere, 2021, p. 151). Farah, in her early years till the age of sixteen, transformed from a poorly differentiated self, heavily dependent on the acceptance of others to a well differentiated self, capable of keeping one's own beliefs and perceptions in the face of criticism: "How did the quiet conformant girl, working hard at school, winning in the Quran recital competition to gain her mother's and teachers' approval, turn into a bitch?" (Fishere, 2021, p. 301).

Farah has undergone several threats to her identity before she left her home at the age of sixteen. Domestic violence from her parents at her unintentional wrong doings left her confused at how to act in similar future situations and the outcome was keeping silent to avoid punishment. Relph's notion of existential outsideness allows us to keep the experiences of home and violation distinct. Through his language of place, it can be stated that domestic violence is a situation where a place that typically fosters the strongest kind of existential insideness has become, paradoxically, a place of overwhelming existential outsideness. The lived result must be profoundly destructive. But there was a major powerful life-changing experience that Farah underwent and had drastically changed her life ever since. At the age of sixteen, she had a crush on her neighbor, Ziad who once seduced her to visit him in his apartment while his folks were out. While she was lying in bed beside him, they were spotted by the neighbors across the street who, accordingly, notified her mother. Farah found her mother standing in front of her while she was trying to find her dress but in vain. Her mother, Zeinab threatened to tell her father and brothers and to tell everyone and issued a list of cruel decisions concerning Farah's future: Farah would leave her family's house and live with her maternal aunt in Mansoura; she should join Faculty of Arts in Mansoura and not Faculty of Economics and Political Sciences in Cairo as she wished; she would wear Hijab (veil) from then onwards; she would never see her close friends again; she would be under the supervision of her cousin,

Mai, and according to Mai's reports of her good behavior, Farah can gradually gain some of her confiscated freedom.

Relph's modes of insideness and outsideness can be used developmentally to examine place experience and identity as they strengthen, weaken, or remain more or less continuous over time. To help shed more light on this process of development, some reference should be made to Mezirow's theory of transformative experience. Mezirow's (1990, 2003) 10-phase process can be described as follows: They are: "1. A disorientating dilemma; 2. Self-examination; 3. A critical assessment of assumptions; 4. Recognition of a connection between one's discontent and the process of transformation; 5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action; 6. Planning a course of action; 7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan; 8. Provisional trying of new roles; 9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; 10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective" (Mezirow, 2011, p.19).

The disorienting dilemma was the scandal she had with her neighbor, Ziad, that led to her expulsion from the family's home and the consequent feelings of anger, shame and guilt. Following that came the stage of self- examination and critical assessment of assumptions. At a later stage, Farah recollects on this experience and concedes that this experience undoubtedly turned her life upside down, but it was not the sole trigger of her change in identity: "How did I change? Actually, I don't know. Maybe it's all about my loneliness and meditation... sitting in my separate castle doing nothing but thinking: of myself, my behavior, my values, the others, all that I read and care about is enriching this area of my meditation. This is how I changed by time, communicating, watching, meditating, failing, succeeding, getting disappointed and having hope" (Fishere, 2021, p. 302). The recognition of a connection between one's discontent [Farah knew surrender would not pay off (Fishere, 2021, p. 302)], and the process of transformation [Farah designed a plan to escape or rebel (Fishere, 2021, p. 302)] led her to the next stage: exploration for options of new roles, relationships or action, a stage that will be discussed in full later in this study. The final stages from 6 to 10 were closely followed by Farah: "I realized that everything is possible by learning, training, planning, patience and reason. I tried it and it worked. Who could imagine that the girl from Mansoura and the Islamic school would become English Literature teacher at the American school?" (Fishere, 2021, p. 302).

Since identity is never fixed or static for it undergoes transformation according to powerful life experiences, powerful transformative experiences are often catalyzed by a challenging circumstance or disorienting dilemma. One of these experiences is known as Nadir experience which is sometimes described as awakenings or traumatic events (Stagg, 2014). Nadir experiences are generally precipitated by nadir events, which are very low points in life that can lead to feelings of disillusionment, inner turmoil, aloneness, anxiety, depression, hopelessness, vulnerability, and despair (Stagg, 2014). Described as dark night of the soul or an edge of darkness, "A sense of disintegration, powerlessness, and emptiness marks its immediate aftermath" (Stagg, 2014, p. 72). However, self-renewal is one way of surviving extreme experiences; "surviving with a different identity, as a substantially different person. One is transformed at a basic structural level" (Jaffe, 1985, p. 101). Farah grows from a weak, compliant, catering for everyone's needs girl to a "bitch:" "In my world, everything is prone to deconstruction and re-assemblance; I am iron-willed but all I need is time" (Fishere, 2021, p. 303). She cannot stand any woman complaining about her marriage: "As long as you're weak, he'll step on your tail, no need for whining. The whining woman is accordingly shocked and calls me a 'bitch'" (Fishere, 2021, p. 304).

Self-identity in Farah's case is intrinsically related to place identity. Mansoura, her home town and where she spent most of her childhood, reminds her of her past identity, of her childhood deprivations, of the social oppression forced upon her, of her own insecurities and low self-esteem. Contrary to Identity Process theory that states that one of the basic guidelines of the process is the desire to preserve continuity of the self- concept, Farah does not want to preserve continuity of her past self. This desire is probably behind her decision to pull her childhood house down. She does not want any reminders of her past identity to exist. Concerning the desire for preserving self –esteem and self –efficacy, Farah is constructing them from scratch. Her 'past environment' hardly enabled her to attain these two guidelines: the slightest wrongdoing was faced with severe

punishment from her mother, and the rare visits from the father were marked by his hot temper that led to beating the children when they were at arm's length or throwing things at them if they were far to reach.: "Unfortunately, it is when parents are at their worst, in moments when they lose their temper or ignore a need, that they have the strongest influence on their children's negative attitudes toward themselves" (Firestone, 2009). Her school never developed her skills: "Actually, I don't remember anything about school except discipline and orders" (Fishere, 2021, p. 123). Thus, it can be stated that Farah's self-efficacy was self-made not environmentally constructed.

Mezirow's fifth stage of his transformation theory, exploration for options of new roles, relationships or action, initiated Farah's attempts at discovering her new values and capacities. She gets divorced from the husband she could not bear and gets into a secret love affair with a married movie star called Kareem El-Malky; she gives up the role of the care-giver to her mother and admits her into an elderly home; she quits her job as a teacher of English Literature and picks up the career she had long dreamt of, that of writing children's literature.

Korpela (1992) suggested that.

> It is likely that places may help with the transformation of identity. Because the outcome of the yearned-for transformation may be only dimly intuited, a person may search for places that promise to capture and crystallize the emergent identity. The realization of the transformed self may come about when the individual experiences a sense of recognition when the place which is a true reflection of the identity is found. For some individuals, personal metamorphosis demands withdrawal from everyday life and the purging of everyday attachments. For others, the journey itself may be the process by which the identity transformation is brought to completion. (p. 244)

In order to preserve her emergent identity, Farah rented the apartment she dreamt of when she was a student at Cairo University: "In the square lying between Mourad street and Nile Street in an old building with marble entrance and high ceiling with a balcony overlooking the Zoo and another one overlooking the quiet side street" (Fishere, 2021, p. 16). In spite of having the apartment of her dreams and furnishing it as she wishes, Farah feels an oppressing vacuum, "I look at the dark vacuum and resist a strong urge to weep hoping to let out the freezing grief inside me; but I don't" (Fishere, 2021, p. 19). For Farah, the journey of identity transformation did not complete the process. She needs withdrawal from everyday life obligations. That is the reason she took all the drastic decisions of destroying her family's house, ending her love affair, admitting her mother into a nursing home and preventing her daughter's wedding by getting her unconsciously abort her child.

Farah's everyday self that is burdened by commitments and obligations entails referring to Heidegger's *Dasein*. Since Heideggar's everyday mode of *Dasein* (Being in the world) is inauthentic because a Self's mineness takes the form of the 'they', its Self is a they-self – a mode that fails to achieve genuine individuality (Malpas, 2018). However, "authenticity does not require severing all ties with Others... Heidegger's view is rather that *Dasein*'s Being is Being-with; in other words, just as with *Dasein*'s worldliness, its inherently social forms of existence are not a limitation upon it but a limit – a further condition of the human way of being. So authentic Being-oneself could not involve detachment from Others; it must rather require a different form of relationship with them – a distinctive form of Being-with" (Mulhall 1996, pp. 68- 69). But Farah, with shedding her everyday mode of Heideggerian *Dasein,* has reached a level of self-differentiation that severed her connection with the world and any meaning or value it might entail. This level of extreme self- differentiation is what brings her close to the married movie star Kareem El-Malky who shares the same experience of self-differentiation When he describes his feeling of alienation and loneliness in spite of being surrounded by people all the time, Farah feels he is speaking on her behalf:

> The loneliness that I speak of has much bigger repercussions. When you think about it, you find that people are the ones who give meaning to most things, except direct physical pleasures. By people I mean family, friends, connections, peers and society in general. That I should be a good artist, a good father or you should be a good teacher or a good children's books writer, a beautiful woman, a nice neighbor, generally a good person, needs evaluation of others. They

> evaluate what you do according to their inherited or decreed criteria. When you are all alone like me, when you don't care about what others think of you, when their praise and dispraise become the same, everything you do becomes yours solely and has no value except in your own eyes." (Fishere, 2021, p. 186)

Farah's crisis is that she does not want any kind of attachment; whether to people or to places. She hates maternity and "if it was in [her] hands, [she] would've have limited it with expiry date, say by the children's 21st birthday" (Fishere, 2021, p. 257); she admits she was never too close to her two brothers, let alone her "cold and boring" husband; she gets rid of her mother by admitting her into a nursing home; and she breaks up with Kareem El-Malky, the love of her life because he would not divorce his wife. Similarly, she feels no attachment to any of the many places she lived in; the only place she had some attachment to was Mansoura and she destroyed the family house in order not to have any more link to it or to the city. She never had her own "fields of care" like her mother, Zeinab or her daughter, Zeina. Zeinab loved a clinic in Kuwait where she found care from the nurses and the doctors; while Zeina loved a café in Lebanon, Pennsylvania where she finds peace and serenity. This lack of attachment to people and to places is what Relph calls "existential outsideness" or "placelessness, "which means separation and alienation from the world. One of the major functions of place attachment is seeking safety and security (Scannell, 2010, p. 5). Fried (2000) argued that individuals maintain proximity to their significant place because it offers protection and a sense of security, which in turn, increases confidence and allows for exploration. However, Farah's sense of her childhood place is one of fear, the feeling that her mother cultivated in her mind: "As much as I loved the street as much as I feared it and feared the dangers awaiting its turns and building entrances... I go out to the street with the burden not to turn or answer anyone or get their attention; the burden of protecting myself from being touched, or worse, from having my dress torn or exposed or losing it altogether, like when it happened on the cursed day of falling in the sewer. All these dangers reside in my mind the moment I step out of the house" (Fishere, 2021, p. 111).

However, this existential outsideness or placelessness took its toll eventually on Farah's life. After liberating herself from all her responsibilities and commitments in 2014, Zeina gets a call in 2019 from her uncle that her mother, Farah, died. The five- year interval between Farah's last reporting in her dairies, from which Zeina got her material to write a novel based on her mother's diaries, to Farah's death are unrecorded. Zeina wonders why her mother would die at the age of 53 while in good health. Fishere foreshadows Farah's suicide when Farah was having a conversation with her lover, Kareem, about whether they had met any human beings resembling them, Farah answers: "They committed suicide; Dorreya Shafeeq, Anna Karenina, Arwa Saleh, Louise in 'Thelma and Louise' and, of course, Virginia Woolf" (Fishere, 2021, p. 185). This lack of attachment to people and places and the inability to communicate made life unbearable for her just like it had made for her predecessors. These women became victims of the strict norms forced upon them by their societies restricting their sense of freedom and individuality. They had to accept and abide by the cultural and social standards of their community or else they would be social outcasts and become targets of condemnation. Their dreams of individuality and freedom clashed with the strict moral codes of their societies; thus, these women's behavior was deemed as delinquent from the limited perimeters offered to them by society. Since they could not be restricted to these perimeters, and since living as social outcasts was unbearable, eventually, life lost all meaning for them and was not worth living.

Conclusion

Just as physical place is important for human beings in (re)forming their identity, the literary element of place as a setting is equally important for the characters. As has been shown above, a person's "environmental past," emotional attachment to place, cognitions about the physical place and powerful experiences of place together form the sense of his / her immersion or "at-homeness" or what Edward Relph calls the feeling of "insideness" or "outsideness." This feeling is linked, positively and/or negatively, to a person's identity which is formed during childhood and changes through a person's lifespan.

Because self-identity is not static, Breakwell's Identity Process Theory follows the development of Fishere's character, Farah, in her transformation from an obedient, conformant, easily-influenced girl to an iron-willed, hard-headed independent woman. Farah undergoes an emotionally and a materially depraved childhood and powerful experiences of place that leave her in a state of "existential outsideness." Her society did not help her in maintaining her self-esteem or her self-efficacy and she herself discarded self-continuity because of her hatred to weakness or any reminder of her past conformant identity. The only guideline that survived was her self-distinctiveness which her mother struggled to keep. In spite of rebelling against her oppressive society by getting a divorce and leading a successful life as a teacher and then a children's books writer, Farah feels a void encompassing her life and engulfing her existence. Her desire to sever any attachment with her past leads her to destroy her childhood house and abandon all her responsibilities. However, her lack of attachment to people and places led to a feeling of unbearable alienation and loneliness (outsideness) that drove her to suicide. Fishere gives a final answer similar to that of Hemingway: human beings have to accept their limitations and to concede that in a battle between self-identity and social identity, society always wins.

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Informed consent There was no need for informed consent.

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