

THE EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN AND SOCIAL CHANGE: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF NAWAL EL SAADAWI'S *WOMAN AT POINT ZERO*

By

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Abstract

*In patriarchal societies like that of Egypt two centuries ago, women were characterized by rules and culture. During the late nineteenth century, women were kept only at indoors and treated differently than men. Women throughout the world face inequity based on gender that leaves not only a physical scar but also a mental scar which is difficult to obliterate. Women have become aware of their importance and they have fought for their rights from long back and it is still prevalent because it has not been achieved yet. Nawal El-Saadawi in her novel *Woman at Point Zero* demonstrates that the women gender is extremely oppressed and culturally suppressed in the Arab society of Egypt. In *Woman at Point Zero*, El-Saadawi beautifully depicts the condition of Egyptian women especially Firdaus, who is the protagonist of the novel. Firdaus describes her complete life story which is full of misery and pain done to her by the men in her life and society. This novel also reveals that the position of women is still under men. Hence this article creates a bridge to close the gap that women are connected with each other no matter what country or race they belong to, through the pain that causes gender-based discrimination. Firdaus explains her story to El-Saadawi by putting light on different phases of life widespread in the society which dominate women at every means such as education, female genital mutilation, domestic violence, prostitution and self-emancipation.*

Keywords: *patriarchy, culture, discrimination, education, female mutilation, domestic attacks*

Introduction

Nawal El Saadawi was born on 1931 and she spends most of her life outside of Cairo. She was graduated and became specialized in psychiatry. She

worked as a Director General for Public health education in the Ministry of Health. During this period she wrote a book entitled *Women and Sex* (1972). Due to the publication of this book she

lost her job with the Egyptian government. Also, the book was banned in Egypt. In this book, she connected women's health to Egyptian economics, politics, religion, history, sexuality and culture. She was the first medical doctor to fight against the circumcision of children that were practiced culturally in countries like Egypt. Nawal El Saadawi also wrote novels and almost all her works highlighted and explored a wide variety of problems that women faced and still continue to face that include the physical abuse of women's bodies, specifically, rape and female circumcision. El Saadawi in all her works tried to reveal the injustice, hardship and violence against the native women in her society. Also, El Saadawi was blamed of blasphemy on various occasions, mostly for meddling in the state, religion and political affairs. Later on, she was imprisoned and was forced to flee Egypt. Nawal El Saadawi has beautifully portrayed the pain and suffering of the common Arab women who became the sufferer of patriarchal society. Saadawi is often said to be the Arab women spokesperson and thus she is called as the 'Mother of Arab feminism.'

Woman at Point Zero

El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, was published in 1973, and was first translated into English in 1983. The novel is based on the real life encounter of El Saadawi with Firdaus, who is a murderer and sentenced to death. While doing research on women and neuroses El Saadawi visited the Qanatir Women's Prison where she met Firdaus—a strong-willed, deeply intellectual woman who has been sentenced to death for murdering her would-be pimp. Firdaus killed the man because he was trying to abuse her sexually. The entire novel is narrated by first person, Firdaus herself, describing her memories of early childhood, alienated from her uncle, and her final life as a sex worker.

El Saadawi was attracted towards Firdaus as she was the only person she had ever met in her life who wanted to end up her life. She didn't even demand for life time imprisonment instead she wanted to die. El Saadawi observed Firdaus to be a very quiet girl who just had one wish to die. The writer got so fascinated to know her story, but Firdaus denied meeting her like she ignored to meet others. But the

writer never gave up and finally she got the chance to meet Firdaus. Firdaus's life was full of struggle and pains caused to her by the males in her life. This made her to hate men and she desperately wanted to die in order to free herself from this patriarchal society. She says

But with each of men I ever knew, I always overcome by a strong desire to lift my arm high up over my head and bring my hand smashing down on his face"(112).

Firdaus explained her story to El Saadawi by putting light on numerous aspects of life that are widespread in the society which oppress women at every step.

Life of Firdaus

Woman at Point Zero is a very disastrous and saddening narrative that describes the tragic, unethical, and struggling life of Firdaus. Firdaus is the central character of the novel. The novel is entirely realistic. This becomes evident from the opening line of the novel:

This is the story of a real woman. I met her in Qantair

Prison a few years ago. I was doing research on the personalities of a group of women prisoners and detainees convicted or accused of various offences. The prison doctor told me that this woman had been sentenced to death for killing a man. (1)

Firdaus starts her narration by describing her childhood experiences when she was with her family. Her world is only occupied by her mother, father, uncle and a childhood friend, Mohammadain. As a young girl, she experienced gender inequity and physical violation at her own home. Throughout her narrative, Firdaus emphasized her relationships with men and also described about the political, social, and economic forces that shaped her life. She says

All the men I did get to know, every single man of them, have filled me with but one desire: to lift my hand and bring it smashing down on his face. But because I am a woman I have never had the courage to lift my hand. And because I am a prostitute, I hid my fear under

layers of makeup. (El Saadawi, Woman at Point Zero 11)

Firdaus's father is an uneducated peasant with an ordinary life. His only job was to eat well. He cultivated the land and visited the Mosque weekly to pray. He cared for his life more than anything else.

Female Circumcision

While going through the saddening scenes of the novel the readers will come to know about the position of women in the patriarchal Islamic society. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is one of the horrifying crimes that are executed against women in the Middle East. As the readers learn through the pages of the novel, it becomes evident that Firdaus is a victim of this crime. Women are gendered and oppressed through genital mutilation. Genital mutilation is done to girls because there is a distorted notion based on sexual politics that girls are exposed to sexual sins and flirtatious instincts.

Firdaus was not only oppressed by the men who are not related to her by blood, but has also been taken advantage by the men who are related

to her. The first important person is her husband Shiek. She says, "I surrendered my face and my body to his body, passively... like a piece of dead wood" (45). The above mentioned line is a perfect example of how Firdaus is described as the sufferer of patriarchal society. She used the word "surrender", implies her as weak and gives an image of how men are aggressive and she is too weak to fight back. She was tortured physically and violated by her father. She was sexually abused by her own uncle. Her father, a typical example of oppressive patriarch, is so mean and cruel that he exchanged his virgin daughter for the sake of money. Firdaus at one point disclosed this as:

My father, a poor peasant farmer, who could neither read nor write, knew very few things in life. How to grow crops, how to sell a buffalo poisoned by his enemy before it died, how to exchange his virgin daughter for a dowry when there was still time...(10)

Through these instances El Sadaawi presents Firdaus' life and her sexual encounters with various men as

battles, which symbolize that she has to fight against these oppression in the patriarchal Islamic society.

El Saadawi in her another novel *The Hidden Face of Eve*, gives instances of the vicious process of young girls' circumcision, with all the physical and psychological suffering following the custom. Almost in all her fiction, El Saadawi has used violence, gender and sexuality as some of the major elements that are managed within the narrative space of the text.

Firdaus enjoyed her childhood days and had fun until when she asked her mother about how she was born. The society understood this innocent question as the beginning of her physical and sexual maturity, which leads to the forceful end of her childhood in her circumcision. After the painful process of circumcision she began to lose the pleasure. Firdaus felt this sharp sense of pleasure and explained as:

From some part in my body, where exactly I did not know, would come a sensation of sharp pleasure. Later I would close my eyes and feel with my

hand for the exact spot. The moment I touched it, I would realize that I had felt the sensation before (12)

After the genital mutilation, when her uncle molested her in her own home, she was not able to endure any pleasure. This missing pleasure is the sad reminder of her mutilation.

Gender Discrimination in *Woman at Point Zero*:

Almost in all African novels male children were given priority than the female children. Firdaus was not given proper care. She was abused, dominated, and tortured by every person. Her uncle took her to Cairo after her mother's death. She was sent to school and she loved the new atmosphere. But the saddest part is her uncle abused her continuously, and she was not able to feel the pleasure due to the circumcision she has underwent when she was young. Though her uncle is a religious person, he is not honest in his own life. He treated people differently based on their status. Later on due to her aunt's hypocrisy Firdaus' higher education was stopped. She wants Firdaus to get married soon. She

insisted Firdaus to get married to a 60 year old man and says that “a respected Sheikh and man of religion like myself sending his niece off to mix in the company of men?!”(36). Though Firdaus' uncle felt guilty, he didn't find it wrong in sending the girl to other men.

Prostitution and Murder

Firdaus got married to Sheikh Mahmoud who is a rich old man. Firdaus described him as an old man with a infection on his chin, who insisted on kissing her. But she escaped from him and got picked up by a male and a female pimp. Again she found herself exploited by them and ran away and worked on her own for some time. She was regarded as a disrespectable woman and this hurt her deeply. She was rejected, abused, insulted and abandoned. She was treated like a prostitute and this made Firdaus to become a respectable woman in the society. She joined a company and became an honorable woman. Firdaus liked her job and enjoyed her life. She fell in love with a man but he married the director's daughter. This affair taught Firdaus that “honour requires large sums of

money to protect it, but large sums of money could not be obtained without losing one's honour” (99).

Firdaus was destroyed by dishonesty. She had never endured such pain in her life. She felt that when she was a prostitute she did not experience such pain because she had no expectations. But when she loved a man, love initiated expectations in her. Firdaus felt that love would make her live a life of a normal human being. But all ended in vain. Disappointed with love, Firdaus returned to prostitution. She felt that prostitution is much better than the married life because there would be no expectations, commitments and no illusions. The experiences that she had gone through had taught her how to face the world. So she decided to be a prostitute, who can choose her own customers.

Firdaus preferred to be a wise, free prostitute than an imprisoned wife. Later on, her pimp Mourzok began to interfere in her life. He tried to control Firdaus but then she didn't want to be enslaved again. So she hit the man and murdered him. When Firdaus began to attack him she felt the fear in his eyes. She says, “this great truth could free all

women from bondage in an instant: men who enslave women do so because they are afraid of the power of their women”(98).

Men fear women for something. There may be some sexual, emotional or physical economic factors that cause this fear. Firdaus realized this and wondered why she didn't hit the man much earlier.

Self- Realization

Firdaus, the protagonist of the novel felt that she was not socially recognized and was denied all forms of visibility. She discovered through her own difficult experiences that she was not allowed to be her own self. The society used her as man's object of pleasure. In turn, Firdaus refused to surrender and be a slave to man. For her self- assertion is not an easy choice. She had to pay a hefty- amount for it. Yet, she kept herself free in society's face that refused to see who she is. By murdering her pimp, she made her pain visible to the society that continuously brutalized her. Through the character Firdaus, the readers see how the society can kill one's identity and force one to extreme violence,

which is inhuman. In her greatest victory, she asserts:

I have triumphed over both life and death because I no longer desire to live, nor do I any longer fear to die. I want nothing. I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. Therefore I am free. For during life it is our wants, or hopes, our fear that enslave us. The freedom I enjoy fills them with anger. They would like to discover that there is after all something which I desire, or fear, or hope for. Then they know they can enslave me once more.... I will be in a place which no one knows. This journey to an unknown destination, to a place unknown to all those who live on this earth, be they king or prince, or ruler, fills me with pride. (101)

Conclusion

The above words explain the power of freedom that Firdaus enjoys when she refused openly to adhere to the standards of injustice. In the face of death, she was empowered beyond all

by the difficult experiences of her life. When life denied her all nobility and deprived of her humanity, death

provided her with an opportunity to fearlessly revenge with pride.

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