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# THE SEEDS OF FEMALE VIOLENCE IN EGYPT: AN INTERROGATION OF NAWAL EL SAADAWI'S *WOMAN AT POINT ZERO*

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## Abstract

When a society conditions men and women who are "pushed to the wall" and who have nothing else to lose, that society suffers. This assertion aptly depicts the story of Firdaus, the heroine of *Woman at Point Zero*. She suffers physical, emotional and mental affliction from all the men in her life: her father, her husband, her customers as a prostitute and her pimp tormentor. This paper examines the political, social, family and religious ethos of a purely mono-religious society whose social prescriptions are negatively skewed against the females. Firdaus, not minding the torture and imprisonment that go with revolt, risks it all to fight against mental slavery that comes with male dominance of society. Nawal el Sadaawi presents to us by her language and characterization, a traditional and religious Egyptian society where the women are "mere toys" in the hands of the men and rulers. This paper therefore, focuses on the use of language and characterization to examine the plight of women in Egypt which are seen as contributing factors of the now commonly called Egyptian uprising or Arab spring - the resistance that led to freedom.

**Keywords:** Heroine, prostitute, torture, imprisonment, revolt, Arab spring.

## Introduction

*Woman at Point Zero* is the story of one Firdaus reduced to nothingness, indeed point zero by a male-dominated Egyptian society. African Literature, Just like African Culture is replete with male dominance. Right from the beginning, it is evidently clear that there has never been any absolute peace in the home. Firdaus, the heroine symbolizes the lot of women and their fate. She was brought up by an uncaring father, refused education and the good things of life just because she was a woman. She decides to assert herself by moving away from home first to her uncle, her friend and then to prostitution. When she discovers that a pimp was taking advantage of her, she stabs the pimp and rejoices at her action. She is executed. It presents a window to the limited and terrifying lives of Muslim women in Egypt and the "positive" reactions available to them upon self discovery.

## Language

The importance of language as a tool which the writer manipulates to send his message across to the readership cannot be over emphasized. This is because:

*Language is first and foremost an instrument for the communication of some messages and so, is more often than not used for the masking or covering of underlying purposes and ideologies of those who appropriate it. (Akpabio Ekpa p.153)*

Such a view appreciates language not as an abstract phenomenon but as a tool for the building of meaning, an enabling facility for the expression of our hidden intentions and ideologies as well as a sufficient access to discovering meaning. Nawal El Saadawi's message is addressed to a society that has for long ignored her gender, the muted group called women. Her writing is not seen as object but a political and ideological weapon directed at confronting society especially the men. This is as a result of the fact that:

*Marriage and the family are mechanisms through which women are subjugated and oppressed, for marriage breeds a master slave relationship where a woman is defined in terms of her husband. (Nnolim p.52)*

Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman At Point Zero* is thought of by some scholars as an autobiographical account. This is because Saadawi as a woman came under the tyranny of men. As a social commentator, she had to grapple with the regime of Anwar Sadat's Egypt. But Saadawi has repeatedly claimed that her story was not autobiographical but real in its entirety. This claim is however thrown to the winds because:

*Artistic sensibility usually determines a writer's Characteristic, emotional and intellectual response to literature. It determines what experiences he converts into literature and how he treats them. (Chinweizu et al p.290).*



Thus, Saadawi in her radical stance presents a woman reduced to point zero by first her family, the men that came in her life and the society in general.

She grew up under the most distressing aspects of life. Firdaus is the woman reduced to this nothingness. Her father never goes to bed without supper, even when there is no food in the house for the kids. Firdaus is not sent to the University, "where she will be sitting side by side with men" (p. 36). Her father, a poor peasant farmer is portrayed as an uncaring father who is wicked to the extent that:

*When one of his female children died, my father would eat his supper, my mother would wash his legs, and then he would go to sleep just as he did every night. When the child that died was a boy, he would beat my mother then have his supper and lie down to sleep (The Fall, p.18)*

Since the parental care expected of a father is lacking at home, Firdaus seeks solace from her uncle who initially, appears to be more loving and caring. The uncle buys gift for her and even takes her to a cinema. He is able to sponsor her secondary education. In school, she develops an incurable addiction to books. Through reading, she picks up political consciousness. She imbibes radical ideas which opens her eyes to the fact that when our leaders shout their favourite slogan, "patriotism" they only mean that "The poor should die to defend the land of the rich, which is their land since the poor had no land" (p. 28).

In *Woman At Point Zero*, it is evident that patriarchal ideology is dominant in the Egyptian ethos. A woman does not have a choice when it comes to deciding her future in Egypt.

This propels Michele Rosaldo to assert:

*It seems fair to say then that all contemporary societies are to some extent male-dominated and although the degree and expression of female subordination vary greatly, Sexual asymmetry is presently a universal fact of human social life. (p.3).*

Thus, Firdaus is married off to Sheikh Mahmod, a man old enough to be her grand father and who has a deformity on his face. When the Sheikh beats her with his shoe and her face and body are bruised, she is not expected to complain aloud.

Violence against women has been elaborately and clearly defined as:

*Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering of women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life (p.73)*

Even when she tells her uncle about her predicament, expecting a kind of reprobation, the uncle shamelessly informs her that all husbands beat their wife. Also, when she tells her uncle's wife that wife battering is unexpected of a respectful man of God:

*She replied that it was precisely men well versed in their religion who beat their wives. The precept of religion permitted such punishment. A virtuous woman was not to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience (p.36)*

She decides to escape from the hell called her husband's home as if there could ever be an escape from this hell of a world. Simone de Beauvoir succinctly writes:

*But in truth a society is not a specie, for it is in a society that the species attain the status of existence transcending itself toward the future. Its way and customs cannot be deduced from biology, for the individuals that compose the society are never abandoned to the dictates of their nature; they are subject rather to that second nature which custom and in which are reflected the desires and the fears that express their essential nature. (p.40)*

Here, Firdaus decides to take her destiny in her hands as she moves out. She meets a man Bayoumi whose initial disposition is that of a considerate and loving man. Bayoumi invites her to his house where she is given the priority of having the bed.

She states:

*I was so embarrassed that I stumbled several times never in my life had anyone put me first before himself. My father used to occupy the oven room in the house. My uncle had the bed to himself while I slept on the wooden couch (p.48)*



Even Bayoumi cannot escape from Saadawi's sledge hammer as he eventually shows up as a male moster when he changed overnight. So, for Firdaus the only place is the street to which she escapes.

*For the street had become the only safe place in which I could seek refuge and into which I could escape with my whole being. (p.51)*

The exploitation of woman by both men and the women is amply demonstrated in the case of Firdaus encounter with another supposed benefactor, Sharifa el Dine, a popular female prostitute in the locality. The image of Sharifa is that of a mother figure. She is seen as one that understands the philosophy of life.

She introduces Firdaus into a life of prostitution. Sherifa turns out to be a parasite as Firdaus does all the dirty jobs while she, the pimp, collects all the money. Thus, like Saadawi's male characters, Sherifa's supposed benevolence must be seen in the light of deception.

She is an oppressor albeit a female oppressor who is out to exploit the weakness of the oppressed. The characters in a prostitute's life are usually of a special breed contrary to the snobbish attitude of the society to a prostitute; she is patronized by the small and the mighty, the low and the high. Meanwhile, she lives under the daily and perpetual fear of being arrested by the law enforcement agents who pretend not to be aware of the services she is rendering to the society. We have a typical example of the polite officer who makes passes at Firdaus and attempts to hoodwink her by promising to give her some money:

*You're a prostitute, and its my duty to arrest you and others of your kind. To clean up the country, and protect respectable families from the likes of you. But I don't want to use force. Perhaps we can agree quietly without a fuss. I'll give you a pound. (p.62)*

Saadawi here raises some fundamental questions. Who are these respectable families who must be protected from the prostitutes? If the respectable families patronize the prostitute voluntarily, how respectable are they? Can there be female prostitutes without male prostitutes or "customers"? Without patronages, prostitutes would be out of job. But who are those people patronizing the prostitute? They are mostly those men of means, perverted beings of the upper and middle classes. The services rendered by

prostitutes cannot be totally dismissed as explained by Bertrand Russel:

*The prostitute has the advantage, not only that she is available at a moment's notice, but that having no life outside her profession, she can remain hidden without difficulty, and the man who has been with her can return to his wife, his family, and his church with unimpaired dignity. In spite of the fact that she safeguards the virtue of church wardens, she is universally despised, thought to be an outcast, and not allowed to associate with ordinary people. (p.98)*

This hypocritical attitude to prostitutes is heavily played up by Saadawi by bringing in highly-placed characters and personalities into the life of Firdaus.

The most ridiculously laughable is that of a foreign leader visiting Egypt who requires the services of a prostitute and on recommendation sends for Firdaus. Firdaus, a supposedly unworthy character in a world of stark hypocrites records a moral victory when she dramatically denigrates and relegates the office of a Head of State by refusing to sell her body to the important visitor.

*Every day he would send me a man from the police and each time this man would try a different approach. But I continued to refuse. Once he offered me money. On another occasion he threatened me with prison. On still another, he explained to me that refusing a Head of State could be looked upon as an insult to a great man and lead to strained relations between two countries. (p. 90)*

Firdaus, being Saadaw's heroine, and naturally a rebel, refuses to be impressed with the slogan, "patriotism", which is expected to sensitize every member of the society into doing the inconceivable for their society.

Saadaw's position here can be seen as that of a writer who clearly perceives the relativity of such catch words as "patriotism" and "National duty" As Firdaus explains:

*I told the man from the police that I know nothing about patriotism, that my country had not only given me nothing but had also taken away anything I might have had including my honour and dignity. (p.90)*



Another example of Saadaw's male monsters is a pimp, Marzoule, who constitutes a threat to Firdaus' means of livelihood. This pimp has friends everywhere. He remains a parasite, confiscating the larger percentage of whatever Firdaus earns for himself until Firdaus decides to break free from his spell on her by stabbing him to death. From this point onwards there is no going back on Firdaus' homicidal instincts, as she wages eventful war on the male group.

Saadawi's language is very uncompromising and very radical. In *Woman at Point Zero* and *The fall of Iman*, words such as "silence", "voice", "fear", "anger", "hate" and "defiance" are used by the writer to symbolically capture the plight of the characters. In *Woman at Point Zero*, we read the plight of Miss Iqbal:

*"At that moment, a memory came to my mind. My lips opened to speak, but my voice failed to come through"....21*

Saadawi empowers her characters linguistically through appropriate register by which she seeks to empower women throughout the world to claim what rightly belongs to them. She is able to create images that capture the plight of women from which they are expected to break through.

Language in *Woman at Point Zero* is evocative, forceful, straight-forward and uncompromising so that the realities experienced by women can be taken as serious. The language and images give readers the impression of the – urgency so that the reader can perceive the situation of women in Saadawi's culture and society.

### Characterization

Nawal El Saadawi in her radical posture characterized Firdaus the central character on whom the entire story revolves in a radical manner.

This is because the lucidity of her style achieves great effect and should be seen as a reflection of the clarity of her vision and mission. She presents Firdaus as the symbol of the oppressed per excellence in juxtaposition to other characters that are the oppressors. Saadawi created Firdaus and imbued her with radicality.

*This is evident in the opening as she affirms: Let me speak. Do not interrupt me. I have no time to listen to you. They are coming to take me at six o'clock this evening. Tomorrow morning I shall no longer be here. Nor will I be in any place known to man. This journey to a place unknown to every body on this earth*

*fills me with pride. All my life I have been searching for something that would fill me with pride, make me feel superior to every one else, including kings, princes and rulers. However, all the men I did get to know, every single man of them, has filled me with but one desire, to lift up my hand and bring it smashing down on his face.(p.7)*

Here, the sense of urgency evoked by Firdaus' situation is a reflection of the urgency of the female situation as portrayed by Saadawi. Germain Greer asserts that:

*The first exercise of a free woman is to design her own mode of revolt, a mode which will reflect her own independence and originality (p.27).*

Thus, Firdaus hearkened to this clarion call to design a mode that will reflect her reaction by first equipping herself intellectually as she concurs:

*I developed a love of books, for with every book I learned something new, I got to know about the Persians, the Turks and the Arabs. I read about the crimes committed by kings and rulers, about wars, peoples, revolutions, and the lives of revolutionaries (p.21).*

Firdaus was thus equipped with the revolutionary consciousness and the intellectual rigour to confront her tormentors and oppressors. Boyce Davies in examining true African feminism adopts Filomina Steady's view as she asserts:

*True feminism is an abnegation of male protection and a determination to be resourceful and reliant. The majority of the black women in Africa and the diaspora have developed this characteristic though not always by choice (pp.35-36)*

Firdaus in her travails encountered Sherifa el Dine after suffering in the hands of Bayoumi. Sherifa infused the same revolutionary consciousness by affirming that:

*Life is so hard you must be harder than life. Firdaus, life is very hard. The only people who really live are those who're harder than life itself. Life is a snake. If the snake realizes you are not a snake, it will bite you. And if life knows you have no sting, it will devour you. (p.45)*



This eye opening 'sermon' from Sherifa propelled her into joining the revolutionary committee in her work place as she declares:

*The time had come for me to shed the last grain of virtue, the last drop of sanctity in my blood. Now I was aware of the reality, of the truth, now I knew what I wanted. Now there was no room for illusions. All women are victims of deception. Men impose deception on women and punish them for being deceived, force them down to the lowest level and punish them for falling so low, bind them in marriage and then chastise with menial service for life, or insults or blows. I now realized that marriage was the system built on the most cruel suffering for women. (p.76)*

This consciousness of self realization is thus translated into reality in her encounter with the male oppressor from another country. She states point blank:

*One day a very important personality from a foreign state heard about me. Immediately after, he sent for me. But I refused to go. My refusal made him even more intent on gaining a victory over me. Every day he would send a man from the police and each time the man would try a different approach. But I continued to refuse. Once he offered me money, on another occasion he threatened me with prison. On still a third, he explained to me that refusing a head of state could be looked upon as an insult to a great man and lead to strained relations between the two countries ... I told the man from the police that my country had not only given me nothing but had also taken anything I might have had, including my honour and my dignity. I refuse to go to men of these sort, my body was my property alone. (p.79)*

This radical refusal of Firdaus to such an important personality being a Foreigner speaks volume for Saadawi's radical progress because:

*Radical feminism provides an insight into female sexuality which is seen as the root cause of women's oppression (Gabriel p.41)*

Here feminism does not evolve and exist in a vacuum. Culture; the totality of a people's way of

life, to a large extent influences the thought and shade of feminism.

Firdaus's radicalism is a boomerang effect of the Egyptian society. When Firdaus realized that the male oppressor Marzoule was reaping where he did not sow, thereby exploiting her, she decides to leave his house. He bluntly refuses to let her go instead decides to 'Lord it over her'. The ever militant and indomitable Firdaus tells him point-blank:

*I intend to leave, I continued to look straight at him without blundering. I knew I hated him as only a woman can hate a man, as only a slave can hate his master. I saw from the expression in his eyes that he feared me as only as a master can fear his slave, as only a man can fear a woman. I raised my hand even higher than he had done, and brought it down violently on his face. His hand started to reach for the knife he carried in his pocket, but my hand was quicker than his, I raised the knife and buried it deep into his neck, pulled it out of his chest and plunged deep into his belly. I stuck the knife into almost every part of his body. (p.84)*

After the brutal and liberating encounter with the pimp Marzoule, the revolutionary, self conscious Firdaus was catapulted to freedom and liberation when she asserts:

*I walked down the street, my head held high to the heaven with the pride of having destroyed all masks to reveal what is hidden behind. My foot steps broke the silence with their steady rhythmic beat on the pavement. They were the foot steps of a woman who believed in herself, knew where she was going and could see her goal. (p.85)*

It is crystal clear that Saadawi attained her literary tour de force in her characterization of Firdaus, the woman of valour who neither fears life nor death but believed to have arrived at the truth:

*And to have arrived at the truth means that one no longer fears death. For death and truth are similar in that they both require great courage if one wishes to face them. And truth is like death in that it kills. When I killed I did it with truth not with knife. That is why they are afraid and in a hurry to execute me. It*



*protects me from fearing death, or life or hunger or destruction. (p 91)*

Firdaus radicalism should not be seen as a bastardization of traditional ethos of conformity but agnomic vengeance on a society that inferiorizes the woman to the crass abasement of her personhood and individuality.

Saadawi perhaps tows the same line with King Jaja in Minima's *Odum Egege* who concurs that "No victory is complete until the enemy is eliminated (p. 133). Another female character that is portrayed in the light of feminism is Sherifa El Dine, a popular female prostitute in the locality. The image of Sherifa is that of a mother figure. In spite of the fact that she sells her body for money, Saadawi characterizes her as someone with a profound understanding of the philosophy of life.

We can infer that Sherifa el Dine has the radical instinct that can devour the enemy oppressor when in contact. When Firdaus told her about her encounter with the exploiter Bayoumi and how he ill-treated her, Sherifa affirms:

*Neither Bayoumi nor any of his cronies realized your worth, because you failed to value yourself highly enough. A man does not know a woman's value. She is the one who .... determines her value. The higher you price yourself, the more he will realize what you are really worth, and be prepared to pay with the means at his disposal. And if he has no means, he will steal from someone else to give you what you demand. (p.46)*

Yet what she had was a primary school certificate in comparison to Firdaus who has both primary and secondary school certificates. Sherifa's feminist instinct propels her to confront Fawzy headlong saying:

*If you hit me I will hit back Fawzy. If you so much as lay a finger on me I'll get Shawki on to you. (p.52).*

This means Sherifa, though a prostitute does not allow herself to be a toy in the hands of the 'enemy' man. Other female characters appear minor. The male characters in *Woman at Point Zero* are presented as is typical of radical feminist writing.

This is because we are made to realize that patriarchal ideology is dominant in the Egyptian ethos, the characters in the novel are therefore deliberately and clearly cast to reflect that reality.

Firdaus' father did not send her to the "University where she will be sitting side by side with men" (p.36). Saadawi's position in *Woman at Point Zero* as regards the characterization of men is

that of an extremist, the men are irredeemable. Her totalitarian imagination in this work is be dangerous, because it is a bad thing, for men.

From Firdaus father to her uncle, all are portrayed on the negative side. Sheikh Mamoud the estranged husband of Firdaus is so fickle and callous to the extent of beating Firdaus like a slave. She explains, "On one occasion he hit me all over with his shoe, my face and body became swollen and bruised" (p.36). Saadawi presents Bayoumi as another 'monster' who exploited Firdaus, though his initial relationship with her was cordial. He later made her go back to the street. We also note the activities of the police officer who makes passes at Firdaus and attempts to deceive her by promising to give her some money:

Saadawi, here characterized the men with one common feature and that is the intent to deceive. This trait is also found in the character of Marzole, the pimp who met his water-loo. After his exploitative tendency, the self conscious Firdaus decides to leave but he refused using force and intimidation to cower Firdaus who asserted herself in radical terms. In all, the male characters are deflated while their female counterparts are inflated to buttress their feminist posture. Saadawi craves for total freedom for her female characters. She has succeeded in whipping up over-blown sentiments on the female problem and this can be seen as a deliberate attempt at attracting special attention to the women.

Firdaus uncompromising attitude to the male characters can also be seen as emanating from Saadawi's position of "the emancipation of Arab women themselves" (p 212).

The grim picture painted by Saadawi in this work can therefore be understood as a skillful portrayal of the oppression of women in the Egyptian society.

## Conclusion

Institutional impediments are fashioned out by men to keep women in total subjugation. For the women, "choice" is a tall and in some religious and cultural areas of Africa an impossible dream. Tradition and culture should provide equal advancement opportunities for both men and women. This is the goal of global education. When and where this avenue is lacking, there is the likelihood that violence will brew with even the least enlightenment by women. So the focal point of Nawal el Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* is an examination of the personal options available to women where culture has defined them within a framework of zero.



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