

A WOMAN’S REVISITATION OF SOCIAL NORMS: BIGOTRY VERSUS FEMINISM: THE CASE OF NAWAL EL SAADAWI’S WOMAN AT POINT ZERO

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Abstract

Nawal El Saadawi’s novella, *Woman at Point Zero*, is a call and an appeal for genuine Islamic religious texts to convince bigots to revisit, create and contrast discourse around religion and an outdated social patriarchal structures, which relegate the woman to the position of inferior being. Thus, she discusses with passion women’s predicament in her own society and takes the responsibility to subvert the patriarchal authority and power which is reinforced by religious dogma. For her, various Muslim societies have deviated from the original Islamic culture. The novelist then creates a new breed of women with enormous power and authority, who, after enduring ignominious actions perpetrated by men on them, resolve not to be crushed in the name of traditions and religion any more. Her protagonist, Firdaus, earns feminist victories by the outright killing of her male oppressor. With this, the novelist posits that women's actions are justified by the enormity and brutality of their male combatants.

El Saadawi’s conviction is that with the combination of religion, cultural and social structures to run the society, a “prostitute” is a self-respected being who has more worth than a slave called “housewife”. This accomplishment extended in *Woman at Point Zero*, dramatizes and subverts some of the male power mechanics which disempower women. My contention is that the novelist advocates for a secular government with the prime conviction that secularization is the only reliable way to freedom, emancipation and self-fulfillment, although most of the issues affecting women in her world are rather cultural constructs.

This paper examines her protagonist, Firdaus’ rebellious attitude, against the institution of marriage, which for her, are related to class domination, slavery and patriarchy. It highlights how she defies radically and with

extremism societal laws/norms with the force of a sledgehammer in an attempt to cope with violent institutional conflicts and her society's retribution from which she suffers and accepts with dignity.

Key words: Woman at Point Zero, bigots, discourse, revisit, sacred texts, marriage,

INTRODUCTION

Elaine Showalters (1986:69-75) believes that:

Feminist criticism challenges the fundamental theoretical assumptions of literary history and criticism by demanding a radical rethinking and revisioning of conceptual grounds of literary study that have been based almost entirely on male literary experiences.¹

In this sense, feminism is believed to be a movement aimed at establishing equal political, economic, social and opportunities for women. Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) once argued that “women were human beings who should not be denied the same individual rights and privilege, including the rights to education, earnings and property ownership”. Thus, feminism is considered a revolution that includes women as well as men, who wish the world to be without boundaries. These boundaries or blockades are known as discrimination in terms of gender, sexual orientation, age, marital and economic status. It is a movement which has brought about a sweeping variety of social and cultural change to the extent that their impacts touch family relations, religion, and the place of women in a gendered society.

Feminist writers depict the importance of equal treatment in the society regardless of individual's different cultures and gives to a greater extent, a standpoint of change in a society, where all individuals of the society are qualified for equality, and thereby, enforces an identity for the women folks and works towards achieving self-realization and self actualization as it affects the woman. Nawal El Saadawi, an Egyptian feminist writer, activist, physician and psychiatrist, has written many books on the subject of women in Islam, mostly *God Dies by the Nile* (1980) and *Woman at Point Zero* (1997), in which she pays much more attention to women's predicament in her society. Thus, the “god” in the first novel is the mayor, who was given a fatal blow by a woman called Zakeya as a result of his ill deeds and treacherous encroachment on her family and; Firdaus, the protagonist in the telling title of the second novel, *Woman at Point Zero*, reaches her limit of exploitation and subjugation and in a position of self-defense, kills the menacing pimp, Marzouk. With female characters killing their male oppressors, the novelist posits that women's actions are often justified, to some extent, by the enormity and brutality of their male combatants on them.

Woman at Point Zero is a novella which relates the story of an Egyptian prostitute, Firdaus, sitting on death row for murdering a pimp and who chooses not to appeal her death sentence at all. Nawal El Saadawi's book describes with passion the different metamorphosis that Firdaus,

¹ Quoted from Sherley Anne Williams, “Some Implications of Womanist Theory”, pp.69-75, presented at the African Literature Association Center, April 17, 1986.

the protagonist, undergoes: from being a daughter, to a wife, to a prostitute, to an office employee, and finally back to a prostitute and her shift from one setting to another is a symbol of her quest for freedom and self-realization by means of violence.

The story traces the life of Firdaus, from her youth in the rural area to Cairo, her father's and uncle's attitude, her early clitoridectomy ritual, and her education and finally to her initiation into prostitution by Sharifa, in which she discovers the power of money, the power of her body and her own self. In that phallogocentric society, she desperately wants to do something with her secondary education certificate, but the prospects for women in the society in which she lives are few. Firdaus is presented to the reader as the epitome of a modern educated woman who is under a "double yoke"; on the one hand of allegiance to culture, tradition, religion, family and community and on the other of her aspiration to self-fulfillment and self-determination. Firdaus's uncle's wife convinces him to marry her off to an oldman of sixty. This marks the beginning her journey of self discovery and to an unknown world. In her writings, the novelist explores a host of topics from women's oppression at the hands of recent interpretations of Islam or religious bigots to the role of women in African literature and from sexual politics of development. Islamic religion and tradition are so deeply embedded in Egyptian law that it regularly spills over into the personal lives of citizens, and dissolves any idea of separation the church from state. With *Woman at Point Zero*, she looks at the nature of cultural identity to the subversive potential of creativity. Throughout this novella, she sheds new light on the power of women in resistance against poverty, racism, fundamentalism, and inequality of all kinds in patriarchal social structures.

The fact of the matter remains that the relationship between man and woman is and has been the very foundation of every viable human society. The social intercourse existing between both of them has generated today a lot of discourse and heated debates as far as the role each should play in society. In African societies, traditional as well as contemporary, especially, in the Arab world where the novel is set, the role of the woman is to be housewife, mother and fulfill domestic assignment.

My intention in writing this paper is to examine how through the character Firdaus, the author offers to demonstrate the confidence she has in the ability of women to lead a life of fulfillment outside unfettered marriage and to show how the embittered character challenges a social organisation which is characterized by chauvinistic male supremacy reinforced by deliberate and distorted religious concepts which have transformed and led her into a tragic character.

I-CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

According to the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, feminism is the belief that woman should have the same equal rights as opportunities as men. In the light of this, we may say that feminists are against the domineering attitude of men in the society and, for that matter, asks the women to be free to define themselves, instead of having their identity defined for them by their culture and their men. In this sense, feminism assumes that such treatment is cultural and thus possible to change and is not simply the way the world is and must be.

Feminism considers different culture as possible values moving towards that culture. In fact, the 18th Century saw significant upheavals in the life of African women and has brought with them various feminist movements advocating the awareness of women's rights. But the growth of

feminism began in Europe and America when women became curious of their oppression, subjugation and marginalization by their male counterparts. The ideology of these movements refers to the social and psychological restraints placed on women and works as a movement that demands the removal of all social, political, economic and other discrimination placed on women. However, the feminist movement is not concerned with achieving the differences in the sexes, it concerns itself with achieving equality for both sexes whereby the woman has the right to find out the person she is, and essentially, strives to become that. Feminism is seen as a demand for political and social reform which is informed by the sexual differences created through societal oppression. To some extent, feminism deals more on the Western issues about women, but since the text under study is about the predicament of African women, my discussion will explore the Africanist concept of gender issues. Bell Hooks (1988) shows the shortcomings of western feminism in the following terms:

Feminism in the [West] has never emerged from women who are most victimized by sexist oppression, women who are daily beaten down, martially, physically and spiritually. Women who are powerless to change their own condition of life. They are the silent majority.

Hooks' view is that feminism coined by the Western states, ignored women in the black race due to racial differences. African women then saw the need to evolve an ideology that caters specifically for the needs of black women folk. Thus, Meza (1993) opines that cultural issues made the universalism of western feminism irrelevant in the African context because the white middle class women's ideology failed to address the cultural specific conditions and interest of black and non-white women. The deficiencies of feminism as practiced by middle class white women and the need to evolve a theory or an ideology that caters specifically for the need of the black women later led to the development of another variant of feminism called called "womanism"². Womanism sums up the aesthetics of the black female literary experience and is distinguished by its focus on the black female experiences. It is a concept set up to correct misconceptions, re-define Africans' womanhood and place in its own specific cultural space.

Ogunyemi Okonjo (1985) is of the same view when he says that feminism, "celebrates or embraces racial, gender, class and the African women consciousness". Thus, womanism sums up the aesthetic of black female literary experience in the sense that it is an African centered gender perception which celebrates black roots and makes the aspirations, need and desires of the black women its major agenda. It is a global ideology whose aim is to achieve self-definition and self-actualization for black women. Although there are various types of feminism namely liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism, Black feminism, the present study will focus on the concept of womanism since the authoress of *Woman at Point Zero* is an African woman. As was said earlier, womanism is the African feminist theoretical conceptualization or discourse which provides the aptest framework for this essay.

Janine Mills, as quoted by Babatunde Ayeleru (2009) agrees with the approach that African critics should eschew "gross generalisation of the subordinate position of women"; but to stick to the norms of various societies where they find themselves and focus on the

² Alice Walker, *In Serach of Our Mothers' Gardens*, San Diego: Harcourt, 1984.

particularities of that society. This explains the difficulty in applying a radical western feminist approach to analyze and to express African peculiar realities and experiences.

African feminists voice their feelings about the treatment of the society to them, through movements, articles and literary works etc. Thus, Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head, Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa, Efua Sutherland, Zaynab Alkali, Chydy Njire, Akachi Ejiegbu, Mariama Ba and Nawal El Saadawi, and others are engaged in fiction writing. These feminist writers have used their literary works as a tool in voicing out the problems facing their female counterparts in the society. By the same token, both Chandra Mohanty (1991) and Gloria Anzaldua (1983), renowned Third World theorists, have pointed out the dangers of ignoring the historical, cultural and political contexts when formulating theories about women and their experience. Thus, women like Nawal El Saadawi's feminist/womanist theory or criticism focuses on the representation of a woman like Firdaus in her literary text; her access to economic means of survival, her painful life and experience in the domestic sphere, her belonging to the community and the stubborn role she offers to play in revolution and sexuality.

With this novella, Nawal El Saadawi appropriates western feminist theories of gender in an African literary context. She espouses a critical theory that is purely African, i.e., indigenous and self-determining. In the process, she subverts the cycle of dependency on western feminist critical theory and adapts western feminist theory and comes out with an over-arching theory which to her, enriches African critical perspectives whose objective, is to problematise the position and situation of African women and, thereafter, offer reconstructive insights into feminist theories.

Nawal El Saadawi paints a vivid picture of the marginalization of women and how the legal system often perpetuates violence against women with a passion and knowledge required to change the powerful oppressive system of family and government. Western critics, most often, view the status of women through a westernized lens, reflecting back on the moral and ethical considerations of women in the West. But Middle Eastern scholars fail to address this inconsistency and only try to defend their own culture and justify their way of life with religious reasons. Women under Islam like Firdaus, are persecuted and abused. Even when outspoken Arab women use their voices, they are often moulded to reflect western prejudice. Many of the Arab women who campaign for rights and a better quality of life, faces imprisonment and exile. Nawal El Saadawi is one such woman.

The critique of El Saadawi raises her criticism of Western feminism because of its ignorance of third-world women's concerns and their focus on issues of sexuality and patriarchy which they isolate from issues of social class and colonialism. For El Saadawi, women's rights and liberation are not to be separated from other rights from their political, economic, and social. She nevertheless rejects Islamic obscurantism and the use of religion as a tool of oppression and also fights against the Western (mis)understanding of Islam.

In this work, El Saadawi looks for the reasons of and questions the direct treatment of women by men and vice versa. Thus, in *Woman at Point Zero* she features, Firdaus, a courageous and educated woman who is very happy to be sent to jail for having defied and withstood phallogocentric social structures and values; yet a place where criminals are detained for moral and corporal punishment, and is eager to die for having challenged cherished values prevalent in her society. Thus, Firdaus is a young woman who dares kill a "man" in his "own world", not hers, and even refuses to sign a petition to the male authorities to commute her death

sentence to prison for life. She even refuses to meet in prison the mental doctor who was to diagnose the mobile of her courageous and radical behaviour.

Firdaus' refusal to meet people, even the author of her story, stems from the painful psychological wound or trauma she suffers from in the hands of irresponsible men of all different social structures who hold dear the principles of a society reinforced by religion. All these entitle them to oppress, harass and abuse her sexually. For her, all men are criminals, "I am saying that you are all criminals all of you: the fathers, the uncles, the husbands, the pimps, the lawyers, the journalists and all men of all profession" (100) who have used her as an object of pleasure and dumped her.

In this novella, written originally in the Arabic language and translated into English, Dr Saadawi, presents and accentuates a hostile space or environment where the man is the "self" and the woman, the "other" and shows how the intercourse between them operates on a serious dichotomous woman/man duality in which the male is assumed to be the overlord, the superior; and the woman, the inferior. But there is a strong belief among African writers with feminist sensibility that their aim is not to subvert male dominant institutions; but to advocate a collaboration and understanding within feminist's theoretical framework, and subsequently, nurture a belief amongst their detractors that the concept is not anti-family, anti-motherhood and anti-man in the African context. In this sense, it is believed that the majority of African writers with feminist sensitivity advocate mediation to the place of women in the male dominated and chauvinistic society. In this case, most male writers as well as female ones, have taken the lead to give women a voice and a choice to make a choice. In every African society, the place of the woman is well-known as playing second fiddle to men and a subordinate role. Despite the fact that feminism has western connotations with its value of individualism, it is the communalism or collectivism in Africa that provides a forum for revisiting Western feminist theory.

In a male chauvinist society like El Saadawi's, the male as the head of the family, is conceived of as the breadwinner and the female is associated with only home and nurturing the family. This is sustained when Firdaus passes her exams. Although her cousin himself is a university graduate, he is hostile to change in mentality and is not ready to allow Firdaus further her studies. Her uncle's decision shattered her dreams, those of becoming a medical doctor or a lawyer by telling her that "El Azhar³," where he graduated, "was only for men" (16) and he could not as "a respected Sheikh and man of religion", allow his niece to mix therein in the company of men. In addition to this misconception and prejudice, there are myths, traditions and innovations which are supposed to win over the true Islamic religious teachings where women are traditionally subdued and oppressed although this could have propelled them toward emancipation and self-fulfillment.

In this kind of society, only men are endowed with privileges that allow them to succeed. This simply means that all the certificates she has had was enough to fetch her husband, and to her step-parents, an expensive dowry. Stuck to patriarchal social values, he refuses to be on the margin and send her to the nation's capital where she could polish up her studies. Fed up with the requirements of her society, Firdaus resolves never to depend anymore on men in searching for a job which could fetch her freedom and make her less dependent on men.

³ The name of the university

II-THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The review of these theories will help to show the need to embark on the radical feminist study of El Saadawi's works with the aim of providing positive development strategies that will encourage the full empowerment of women and create avenues for the promotion of gender equity. By adopting a radical feminist approach, it is also hoped that this study will help to motivate women to live more fulfilling lives without fear of societal inhibitions or ostracism.

Bryson (1992:85) believes there is a clear theoretical starting point which distinguishes radical feminism from other approaches and provides a unifying framework within which diverging ideas have been developed. It is essentially a theory of, by and for women. It is based firmly in women's own experiences and sees the oppression of women as the most fundamental and universal form of domination and its aim is to understand and end this.

Concurring with Bryson's ongoing remark, the study further hopes to guide the reader to understand the messages that Nawal El Saadawi conveys so fervently in her texts. These messages are of threefold nature. Firstly, African women have been oppressed for too long and seemingly contributed to their own oppression. Secondly, an African woman can be rendered whole again through consciousness raising. Thirdly, men and particularly women, must be treated with fairness and justice in the distribution of benefits and responsibilities, which may accrue socially and economically. Therefore, an aggressive feminist determination to end male chauvinism and oppression and a vigorous method of attaining selfhood, rather than being passive supporters of patriarchy is one of the options that Nawal El Saadawi has provided for her female characters.

III-MARRIAGE: DISILLUSION AND ENFRANCHISEMENT

Woman at Point Zero is about an orphan girl of less than nineteen called Firdaus, who against her will, was given in marriage to Sheikh Mahamoud, her uncle's wife's uncle, an old man of almost sixty by her own uncle, who raised her after her parents' death. But she no sooner got married than realised that she was living in "hell". She does not love her new husband and is worst of all ill-treated by this dirty, greedy and sexually impotent old man whose swelling chin has the "odour of dead dogs" (43). When she marries Sheikh Mahmoud, he wraps his body around her at night, and she washes herself thoroughly immediately he finishes with her body. For the Oldman, she has become his own property because he has bought her with his own money and this entitles him to do whatever he likes with her. Right from the cradle this man has been taught to consider the woman as a chattel and many women in that society have the embedded feeling that the ideal life for a woman is to slavishly and blindly obey her husband.

In Nawal Saadawi's fictional world, religion, love, marriage, tradition and customs encompass her people's existence. The whole community has been brainwashed in the process of socialization. So the fact of the matter is that the role that the woman is to play has been ascribed in her relationship and contact with the society into which she is born. Saadawi's society decrees that children should be bred in the mainstream of a variety of oral literature like songs, stories, proverbs and sayings which serve as a code of conduct, shape and guide them towards being true sons and daughters to serve both the family and the community. Thus, virtues like honesty, loyalty, unconditional faith and religion control strictly their lifespan. Religious myths instill in them the supremacy of the man and give him the right to ill-treat his womenfolk. He can

take as many women as he can afford so far as he pays the bride price. Consequently, a woman's role as soon as a child is born is to empower her son and advise him to submit his women-sisters, mother, aunts, cousins-and perpetuate the tradition since women are the foundation and the fundamentals of patriarchal socialisation.

Imbued right from the cradle with all these social constructs imposed on her by her father, mother, uncle and Shekh Mammoud, society in one word, Firdaus' marriage turns into a nightmare. To seek freedom, she tries to escape but all the men who come her way only propose her love. Men like the Bayumis, Fawzis, the policeman and all the rich men, the Arab Prince, etc., were almost the same. In her relation with all these men, it dawns on her that the world in which she lives is a male's property, and as a woman, she is bound to suffer in their hands. In her quest for peace and liberty, she unfortunately realises that all her lovers only sexually abuse and harass her; and the only genuine relationship between her and them is rather based on sexual intercourse. Although she became a successful prostitute, as she often says, she did not like the job. She did not enjoy the work to the full: she hated the job itself and she was very selective about her clients. By the end of the novella, it dawns on her that in a culture where women are discriminated against in all social spheres, prostitution is the only way to be empowered.

But it takes her many years to free herself, i.e., to tear her body and self away from all the men who tyrannically held them in their grasp. Now they have become her own property. Now, she decides where to live, what to eat and who to sleep with. Her make-up, hair and shoes are upper-class. At the age of only twenty-five, she has her first expensive apartment and a personal bank account which mounts on daily basis. At her apartment, she has enough free time to read and even discuss political issues with the few close friends she has made. She receives guests in her bedroom instead of in her library or living room which she decides to keep for herself alone. Owing to the bitter experience with men, every man fills her with the desire to stab him for revenge. But she hides this fear under the layers of expensive clothing. When Di'aa, the journalist and man of culture, hurts her ego by telling her that she was not respectable woman, she makes use of her secondary school certificate to look for a decent job; but she realizes that that job is a new form of exploitation and relapses back in prostitution. This work gives her not only freedom but also power over men and dignifies her. Unlike other prostitutes she charges high for her body and is very selective.

To revenge herself, she becomes very expensive. Many influential and powerful men come to her; but she turns some of them down to prove that she has "power over her own body". In an exchange with her former friend, Ibrahim, who often comes to her, she realizes bitterly that he never loved her. Rather, he wanted, as most men, free sex.

But in love I gave all: capabilities, my efforts, my feelings, my deepest emotions. Like a saint, I gave everything I had without ever counting the cost. I wanted nothing at all, except one thing. To be saved through love from it all. To find myself again, to recover the self I had lost. To become a human being who was not looked upon with scorn, or despised, but respected and cherished and made to feel whole. (86).

Her genuine love for Ibrahim is not returned. Totally deceived, she chooses to abandon her work at the company and becomes a prostitute, whom she thinks, is far better than the subjugation and legal oppression called marriage which not only degrades the woman but also

relegates her to the position of an animal. For her, a prostitute is a free woman who gives herself to whoever she likes and at a given time or will and charges a lot of money to her suitors. In her own terms, a successful prostitute is far better than a “mised saint”. “My insistence on remaining a prostitute proved to me this was my choice and that I had some freedom, at least the freedom to live in a situation better than that of other woman.” (89).

Meanwhile Firdaus’s life has been tormented by hunger; the hunger for food and the hunger for success. When a child, she was denied food by her father who ate a full dinner. When she got married, her “smelling husband” always complained about her eating too much food. When she became a successful prostitute, she had enough money to buy and eat whatever she wanted. It is from experience she got to know that because of hunger “all women are prostitutes of one kind or another”.

Unconsciously, those who are married sell themselves to husbands for food and shelter and; those who are not, often “sell” themselves sexually for promotions or raises in salary at their jobs. In the phallogocentric system which has conditioned her and where she felt she was subservient to men, being a prostitute, i.e., selling sex for money is far better than trading it for food as is in marital life or in promotion in the civil service. This gave her the feeling of freedom and liberty. To cope with the requirements of the society, Firdaus tries a period of respectable work at an office. Unfortunately, she finds there that as a female she is given no respect, is awarded a small salary, and is moreover subject to sexual harassment from her male counterparts. By the end of the novella, she comes to the conclusion that all women were prostitutes who sold themselves at various prices, and an expensive prostitute was better than a cheap one. In Firdaus’ eyes, a wife is a prostitute with no wages. And she further on emphasises: “I became a very successful prostitute. I was paid the highest price, and even men of great importance competed for my favours.”(p. 89) and, most of the, time she often turns them down. She did not like the job; but it brought her fortune and fame. She became very rich, just like her friend, Sharifa, who led her into prostitution, until the day she met Marzouk the pimp who was jealous of her success. In his effort to sexually harass her and share the spoils gained in prostitution, and her refusal to yield to his demands lead him to use his knife to intimidate her. In a heated exchange with her, Marzouk threatened to kill her with his knife. Unfortunately she seizes the knife. Thus, she narrates her misadventure: “I raised the knife and buried it deep in his neck, pulled it out of his neck and then thrust it into his chest, pulled it out of his chest and then plunged it into his belly”(95). When Firdaus commits the crime for which she is going to be hanged, i.e., stabbing a pimp who attempts to confiscate her earnings, the reader is invited to sympathise with her.

The murder that Firdaus commits propels her to the rank of “a princess” and to a greater extent, restores to her the confidence and pride she could not afford in the phallogocentric society. Although the hero of the story is on the verge of death, she manages to destroy the subject of her oppression, her exploitation, humiliation and expropriation. She has become the master and the pimp the slave. Firdaus has attained her feminist objective: murder to liberate. This reads as a mind-set for women to liberate themselves with whatever means at their disposal. Although she is hanged, she kills, tears money, symbol of power into pieces, and slaps an Arab prince who offers her an amount of 3000 pounds; exudes some pride in her and brings her inner peace after her acts. In murdering the pimp, Firdaus’s acts recalls Frantz Fanon’s (1968) critical insight as far as revolution is concerned. Killing a man, for her, is the to prove her humanity. Thus, Firdaus’ weapon as a rebel is the proof of her humanity. For her, to kill a man is to kill two birds

with one stone, i.e. to destroy an oppressor and the woman she oppresses at the same time. There remain a dead man and a free woman. Firdaus thus becomes consolidated:

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. Therefore I am free. For during life it is our wants, our hopes, our fears that enslave us. The freedom I enjoy fills them with anger (101).

After the murder, she meets a prince who take her home in his luxurious car where he wants to sleep with her and shed money on her, thus displaying his fortunate social status by asking her to give the price of her body. The narrator presents the prince to us as the kind of macho man who uses women as they are and thinks that his money can afford him any kind of woman. In his effort to express his wealth after she had highly priced her body, Firdaus tears “into little pieces with a pent up furry” (98) the brand new banknotes he gives her. When the prince calls her a prostitute, she refuses it and explains to the prince that in tearing the money one after the other, she means to destroy irresponsible bigots like her father, uncle, husbands, Bayoumi, Di’aa, Ibrahim and even the Prince. All of them embody impotent patriarchal social structures and their values in the Arab world; they are to be held responsible for her present situation and condition. She further on explains that, “[a] prostitute always says yes, and then names her price. If she says no she ceases to be a prostitute” (89). During a heated discussion with the prince, she unexpectedly slaps the Prince and avows that she is a criminal; but a criminal who “kills criminals”(100)for what men do to women turns them into criminals and that she is not a prostitute in the fullest sense of the word. The Prince calls the police who take her to prison. Just as Nawal El Saadawi illustrates why prostitution cannot be considered as oppressive, Firdaus uses prostitution as a method of finding freedom rather than enslaving herself. To say that “sex work” rendered her subservient to men does not truly hold when she had already endured a clitoridectomy, sexual abuse, and a forced marriage. Prostitution does not render her more enslaved; in fact, it gives her the freedom she craved for.

Dr Nawal El Saadawi uses prostitution as a powerful means to empower her character although in that society, bigots contest vehemently that kind of life. With this Firdaus has been fulfilled and self-realised. For the novelist, prostitution works as the most efficient tool in challenging the traditional and religious discourse that have a strict view on the female body. In using her body as a source of revenue, Firdaus achieves her freedom and becomes self-reliant. In the process, the money she earns from her prostitution spree, gives her the power of choice: she chooses at the restaurant to eat whatever she wants and this power is also extended to the waiter. Not only does this surrender him but it also prevents him from staring at her.

In Saadawi’s fictional world, some Arab elite official Islamist bigots, in their bid to control all the women and girls stick in society try to stick to sanctions that have sometimes hypocritical connotations. In their struggle, they do not desire to know what women are craving for but do not have time to practice what they preach and teach or even do; they do not obey principles elaborated by themselves. Many of them like the Arab prince featured in her fictional work, will leave their multiple wives at home to take women like Firdaus and enjoy with them hedonistic pleasures. During one of his encounters with Firdaus, she dares tell him that “all you do is to spend the thousands you take from your starving people on prostitutes.”(100). That is why the Prince stands as a symbolic representation of macho men in the Arab world especially in the Middle East and Egypt, who share their money and rejoice with prostitutes at the expense of their faceless and voiceless wives. To Firdaus, all men are criminals because what they do to

women and to girls physically and morally with their money and leave them traumatised for life, is more than a crime.

In a flashback, she tells him how she comes to be a “prostitute”. On hearing this, the prince begins to be afraid of her. Having worked for three years at the industrial concerns and out of experience she says “I realised that as a prostitute I had been looked upon with more respect and been valued more highly than all female employees...” (75). For her,

A successful prostitute was better than a misled saint. 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 chastised them with menial service for life, or insult, or blows (86).

Treating the space of sexual intercourse for money and therefore for sexual autonomy, Nawal El Sadaawi thinks that a prostitute is far better than a housewife to serve an “ingrate” called man, who uses her as an object and dumps her as soon as possible. It is not surprising that issues of sexuality automatically come to bear when one discusses gender issues. She thinks that if a man can afford to sleep with and marry as many women as he can why should she live in a slavish condition with a man and be, “thingfied”.

From an African perspective and as a matter of fact, mothers, by definition, cannot be single. In Nawal El Saadawi’s culture, motherhood is defined as a sexual partner to a man because a woman is synonymous to wife and a wife must unconditionally be submissive to her husband. In most African feminist literature, motherhood which in other societies constitutes the dominant and unquestionable identity of women is subsumed under wifehood and nurture. This is sustained when Firdaus’ father died. Before that she bitterly explains that when his brother died, “he would beat my mother then have his supper and lie down to sleep” (18). On the contrary if it is the female child that dies he will sleep ordinarily without complaining. From this particular point, the requirements of some patriarchal Arab society are very stark. In this kind of culture, having a male child is a blessing. When she moves to live with her uncle after her father’s death, the rest of her education-informal and formal-was carried on by her uncle who first of all considers her as his own daughter and secondly as his cousin and finally as his “bed-mate”. Meanwhile during one of their outings, Firdaus’ uncle uses religion to bind her. He tells her that according to the “Qur’an”, it is believed that a woman is not allowed to express her love or to kiss a man to express one’s love for him. This marked the beginning of her troubles and serves as a starting point for her rebellious attitude.

Drawing from the strong language found in religion against unlawful sexual activity before marriage, her uncle uses the fear of societal retribution to discourage his niece to refrain from sexuality. For him, she might one day be engaged in premarital sexual behaviour and find herself in the hands of bigots. Nawal El Saadawi believes that rules without explanation is not fair and can only stimulate people’s curiosity and interest in sexual intercourse and lead them to unknown destinations. For her, when instilled with a strong sense of self-esteem in Firdaus, she will be better equipped to deal with the pressures she will face throughout her life.

IV- NAWAL EL SAADAWI’S PERSPECTIVES

El Saadawi has a vision of society within which people can govern themselves. El Saadawi has said that in her ideal world there would be no established religion and no books. She

is against the idea of a “fixed text” and sees Holy books as political books. The *Old Testament*, the *New Testament* or the *Qu’ran*, are, for her, political books because they speak about war, invasion of other people’s countries, of inheritance, of money and has little to do with justice, morality, or spirituality. For her, the conception of justice, freedom and love have become ambiguous because the world in which we live is a hypocritical one in which the superstructure tries to twist language at the expense of the infrastructure to make it have double meaning; peace may mean war and democracy, oppression.

Nawal El Saadawi uses gender as the explanatory model to account for women’s subordination and oppression in her world. In this, it has never been thought about that the woman as well as her male counterpart is a socio-cultural construct but is natural and for that matter God’s doing. Men of different social strata use elements of tradition and culture to maintain women in slavish conditions, subjugate and oppress them. This reveals the real contradictory processes and decision involved in the politics of prostitution in the Arab world. All men use culture and religion to support impotent societal norms that bind both leaders and the led and guarantee virtual social stability and justice to the detriment of women.

As far as all forms of sexist and cultural discriminations are concerned, El Saadawi urges women to arise out of the subjugation and exploitation they have been victims of and express their own self as her protagonist had done and stop being set against a dangerous background of dead “otherness” in an attempt to question the very authority of malestream or phallogocentric discourse. Her prime conviction is that an indifference to this condition and situation can give rise to the reinforcement of patriarchal behaviour in societies by relegating and sinking them into a subhuman level.

Sexual harassment is a problematic that Saadawi regards as evil that needs to be fought at all costs; men as well as women should be educated to understand and respect the sexual fears and aspirations of women. For instance, Firdaus’ uncle use some patriarchal strategies coupled with religious myths to steal her virginity from her but was instrumental to her education from which he has the most made benefits: for him giving her to the old retired Sheikh Mahmoud, who according to Firdaus’ uncle’s wife, a relative of her, has “big pension and no children” (36) to care for. From this old man, they expect a sum of “hundred pounds” as the dowry. This will not only enable them to pay their debts but will also enable them to buy many commodities and even serve in part as buying the bride’s outfit. Firdaus’ uncle considers, in his own terms, the cost of this dowry as a “sufficient blessing from Allah” (37) and predicts that “an old but reliable man is surely better than a young man who treats her in a humiliating manner” (36). As soon as the marriage takes place, Firdaus runs away to her uncle's house, but is taken back to Sheikh Mahmoud, her husband’s house immediately because all husbands in that world beat their wives freely. Back at her husband's house, Firdaus is beaten again. But this time around, when Sheikh Mahmoud beats her with a big stick, she runs away to the street. She left the old Sheikh Mahmoud amidst humiliations and dehumanisation and finds a new space.

When she stops at a coffee-house to beg for some water, Bayoumi the owner, invites her to live with him and promises to help her find a job. Firdaus’ shift from her father's House, Uncle’s house in Cairo, the boarding school, her life with her husband, Sheikh Mahmoud, and with Bayoumi, helps her not to take things for granted anymore. It opens her eyes on some realities. It is long quest for freedom, justice and self-fulfillment. But when she insists on having a job, Bayoumi becomes annoyed, tied her up and invites his friends to rape her until she

manages to escape and meets a policeman in the streets, who also rapes her in exchange of her freedom.

The street has been symbolic in the development of the character of Firdaus. The streets open her eyes to reality and raise her perception to a higher level. They have given her a new impetus in becoming a means of uplifting her social status. The street liberates her from the domination of men. Whenever she faces some oppression from men she runs out to the street and it has become the only safe place. When she runs away from Bayoumi, she meets Shariffa who gave her the opportunity to discover her own self and learns from her to value herself. To her amazement, Shariffa, though a woman like her, is not different from her men like her husband, Mahmoud, Bayoumi or her uncle, for she also takes advantage of her. One day, as she looks at herself in the mirror, she finds that she is reborn. The narrator describes her body as a “new body, smooth and tender as a rose petal” (52).

Luckily on her way when she gets out of the hands of the policeman, she falls under the hands of a rich man who takes her in his car and brings her in his apartment and allows her to take a decent bath; in other words, to be her own “self”. After having good time with her, the man gave her a “ten pound note”, a note she has hitherto never held in her hand: “I held the ten pound note in my hand...” (67). She offers herself a chicken and eats at a restaurant. After all she soliloquises, “who has decided that the ten pound note is to be considered forbidden?” (67).

Textual evidence suggests that despite her being educated men’s attitudes toward educated women in her community cannot be changed and is found in the behavior of the policeman, the coffee man and even Firdaus’ uncle: while the latter refuses to look for a job for her after having successfully passed all her exams with certificates in hand he prefers giving her into marriage to an old man of 60 as is the habit in that kind of society the policeman did not even look at the certificates she shows in her quest for a job but raped her for his own pleasure.

Domestic violence represented by wife battery or abuse is rampant in Saadawi’s part of the world. Women like Firdaus and her mother in the novel have suffered from being battered by all their husbands, boyfriends, lovers and sexual partners. Sheikh Mamoud beats her on several occasions for one or another reason; Bayoumi beats her and forces her into love while the policeman and Marzouk rape her. Wife beating, raping and sexual abuse constitute an endemic disease in this kind of society. Nawal emphasizes in this fiction that like in all different cultures, religions and communities the statistics of the suffering Firdaus suffers from shows that all men are equal in terms treatment of their women. To a question asked by Firdaus as to know what “man” means Sharifa Sala el Dine explains: “anyone of them, it does not make any difference. They are the same, all sons of dogs running around under various names. Mahamoud, Hassanein, Fawzi, Sabri, Ibrahim, Awadain, Bayoumi” (52). And says that neither of these cronies realise her worth in society and concludes that:

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 all the means at his disposal. And if he has no means, he will steal from someone else to give you what you demand (55).

On hearing this, Firdaus resolves to show her worth to men. She resolves henceforth to value herself and begins to say “NO” and “impossible,” to men. For bigots like the pimp “the word impossible does not exist” at all. But it does exist for Firdaus. She tries to reverse the trends

of her society in becoming the master and man, the slave. In an instance, when three men were asking for her favours, she does not hesitate to tell one of the men, who mentions ten pounds that the sum of money he proposes is not up to what she expects. The narrator tells us that of the three men only one “pronounced the secret word, the key to the riddle” (68) which Firdaus solves. The following exchange illustrates this. Thus, she asks:

“How much will you pay?”

“Ten pounds”.

“No twenty”.

“Your wishes are my orders”, and he paid me on the spot (68).

In carving women like Firdaus and her uncle’s wife with masculine values, Dr Saadawi wants us to understand that there is a ray of hope in the Arab world. The woman's responsibility in a marriage starts the day she is chosen to marry a man she does not, most of the time, love to be her husband. If she wants to enjoy her inalienable rights, she must obey men’s commands. In this case she can expect from him a treatment in accordance with patriarchal decree. Her conviction is that in some societies men do not abuse their wives because of scriptural teachings, but because of a natural instinct of domination and aggression and that is why Firdaus is denied the opportunity to further her studies, have a job and a decent living thus putting her in perpetual suffering in an abject poverty though educated until she discovers prostitution as a way out of her slavish condition. The author’s analysis reflects the failure of modern Arab societies in treating this perilous condition and state of mind in men. Nawal El Saadawi believes that today research in psychology as far as men’s behavioral patterns in Arab and the Middle East countries has it that the panacea to the aggressive behavior she has featured in her novel is luckily tackled in that part of the world where she was formerly removed from her posts because her pronouncements were considered too dangerous and seditious.

With *Woman at Point Zero*, Nawal is vehemently fighting against the widespread erroneous misconception about the status of women in her society on the one hand and all over Africa on the other. This misconception has always been enhanced by all kinds of sociopolitical agencies that encourage men and persuade them to make efforts to correct their misunderstanding of issues relating to women’s condition of life. In addition to this misconception are the regrettable practices in most so called Arabic countries or societies where myths, traditions and legends have won over the true Islamic or better Quranic teachings and where women are traditionally subdued and oppressed as discussed by Nawal El Saadawi in her writings.

Saadawi’s fictional works⁴, for example, focus purely on the oppression, subjugation and the reducing of the woman to the subhuman level in traditional African societies and therefore on the discourse of protest against the cultural, political, economic injustice and religion of which women like Firdaus, Sherifa, her mother and many other women are victims. Her analysis and writing draw serious attention to the brutalities, subordination and other oppressive realities and manifestations of bigots of tradition and culture on women in Africa. And her aim is to use the avenue of fiction, first written in Arab to enable, unlike the rest of the women in many parts of Africa, her female counterparts to widely read and understand their lot and to counsel and

⁴ *God Dies by the Nile*(1976) and *Woman at Point Zero*(1975) both written Nawal El Saadawi are tales of tragedy and deception and work as a political tragedy.

negotiate with modern African men the negative experience of patriarchal exploitation of women in Africa.

Nawal El Saadawi wants to convince some Arabo-Islamic bigots to try as much as possible to evolve in a very different way than in other religions of the modern world. To a greater extent, her novel is a powerful appeal for all stakeholders to compare and contrast discourse on traditional Arabic themes and true Islamic ones, not myths and legends, to enable an easy distinction between sacred texts of the faith and Arabic views. For instance, like Islam, Christianity is a very patriarchal religion but the longstanding separation between Church and State has enabled women to climb the social ladder whenever possible to withstand the binary opposition created and sustained by myths. This allows her to place her compatriots, i.e. the Arab women into the global women's emancipation mold and open their eyes to the evolving modern world where new avenues are beckoning, emancipate themselves in one word.

Saadawi is radical in her pronouncement and goes far beyond her African female counterparts to denounce social and political injustice prevailing in her society of origin. To the local authorities who pleaded on the behalf of a foreign national, a diplomat in one word, for sexual favours by asking her to show her sense of patriotism, Firdaus replies: "...I knew 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 my dignity" (90). Firdaus refuses and is thus empowered. Nawal thinks that in her society a woman is the most exploited slave that is given by love or by force to a "useless" macho man who uses her as an object and abandons her at will. In this society where she has had the opportunity, unlike in the rest of Africa as a Muslim born to be schooled, fails to be self-determined.

Her critique and analysis of the setting and its impact on both men and mostly women shows that she is aware of the bigotry that exists in the society, and how men run it and commit crimes in the name of societal norms reinforced by sacred texts which impose a common code of conduct on women. In this society or community with the benediction of religion, women find denigration and degradation in their contact with their male counterparts; sexual harassment and rape are the nature of male supremacy.

In this novel, she therefore entrusts Firdaus with the ability to recognize the subordination of her fellow women and the discrimination based on sex from which she suffers in her contact with men with the same certificates and who cannot believe that a woman like her with those certificates should be given a job and an opportunity to express herself and speak her mind. In this sense the narrator wants to show that if she can afford to have all these qualifications and even certificates of merit, it is high time the woman was given face, a voice, a choice to make a choice and a chance to determine her being, to be self-fulfilled in one word.

Nawal El Saadawi in her argument does not attack religion and patriarchal laws blatantly but express with fury the disapproval of certain glaring abuses and practices from which women suffer and which contribute to some extent the enslavement of women and impedes their emancipation as well.

Just like many feminist scholars, Nawal El Saadawi, has throughout her writing, showed the extent to which male bias has determined the normative assumptions of the social natural and behavioral sciences, in the arts, literary and artistic canons where it is no longer restricted to the works of men. The Feminist writer writes to tell about being a woman and describes the reality from a woman's point of view. Feminism aims at projecting the place of women in the society by portraying their values by giving them a chance in the society. The predominant concern of

African female writers is a new position of women with the help of tradition and modernity to change women's consciousness in contemporary African society.

For the novelist, "It is no longer possible to escape the fact that the under-privileged status of women, their relative backwardness, leads to an essential backwardness in society as a whole" (Nawal El Saadawi, 1980:1).

CONCLUSION

Nawal El Saadawi's conviction is that in her Arab world, women's oppression or subordination is not taken for granted because men use violence to maintain and enhance their supremacy and insist on respecting the code of conduct prevailing in society. As far as the social, political, and economic advantages are concerned, women are marginalized and victimised. In this kind of phallogocentric Arab society, men use religious values to control women and exercise their authority over them for religion has it that it is a societal organization characterized by the supremacy of the man-father of the clan or in the family-and advocates the legal dependence of wives or wife and children and excludes women from some religious observances and activities which can empower them. Saadawi's view on the matter is to make an effort to dissociate religion and tradition from ordinary life for the benefit and emancipation of women.

As a social analyst and critic, El Saadawi believes that the problematic of difference is learned instead of being biologically inherited and is understood to advocate change in mentality, attitudes and in the lives of women as well as men. For her, it is high time women's subordination belonged to tradition, i.e. the past and women's emancipation or gender equity geared towards the future despite bigot's struggle to maintain a status quo since gender roles are culturally and socially constructed. Women are fighting for collaboration and sharing of roles with men and wants the status of human being they share with man to be recognized and have their own identity though they are different from men.

Feminist writers like Saadawi do not hesitate in using gender as the explanatory model to account for women's subordination and oppression in the Arab world. In this, it is never thought about that the woman is a socio-cultural construct and all these elements are used to maintain her in oppression and subordination.

Woman at Point Zero, as the writer sees it is a novel which is not only directed to the Arab world but to the world at large and Africa in particular. In the world over, women undergo violence and this is used by bigots to deny them their rights. In many cultures just like this one, for instance, they are regarded and treated as inferior human beings. The prejudices against them are therefore deeply rooted in the patriarchal systems. Gender based violence in all its forms is a perpetuating problem for women in the world. Women do not have chance to express themselves freely. In one word they are the "others" in feminist definition and unknowingly accept subjugation. The curricula of socialisation should reflect and advocate what Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) calls a "humanistic feminism that encompasses men, women, and children".

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