

**LENDING VOICE TO THE SUBALTERN: THE CASE OF FIRDAUS
IN NAWAL EL SAADAWI'S *WOMAN AT POINT ZERO***

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Abstract

*This paper intends to analyze closely the work of one of the most celebrated feminist authors, emerging from Egypt, Nawal el Saadawi. Her *Woman at Point Zero*, is considered to be a path-breaking and minute study of the religious hypocrisy of the Arab culture, a culture that has extensively used religion and various discriminatory rituals like female genital mutilation in order to subjugate women and reduce them to nothing but sexual slaves. She, also being one of the notable voices of the group of Islamic feminists, makes it possible to shed some light on how the wrong interpretation of the Quran by the conservative Muslim exegetes has contributed to the consolidation of a phallogentric and patriarchal culture, which led to the maltreatment of women in the Arab culture. Through the character of the protagonist, Saadawi portrays the most candid picture of the predicament of women in Arab culture and how she transcends her miserable plight through the self liberatory as well as the defiant act of murdering her male oppressor.*

Key words: *Islamic feminism, patriarchy, religious malpractice, female genital mutilation , sexual abuse, murder.*

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Helene Cixous confidently announces in her seminal work "The Laugh of the Medusa":

Women must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies- for the same reasons, by the same law with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text- as into the world and into history- by her own movement.

Cixous, with these words literally laid the foundation for a very far-reaching movement which took the entire world by storm in the later half of the nineteenth century that came to be known as Feminism which absorbs the women and undertakes to analyze gender politics. The movement aimed to foreground women related concerns, perspective and the battle for equality as well as a recognition for women as an equally active and productive member of the society. This movement first erupts in the form of political unrest which is known in the history as the suffragette movement, as women, right at the outset realized that in order to improve their plight, first they should be able to partake some portion of political authority which would place them on a far solid ground. What sets this movement apart from other movements is that, rather than originating from the privileged state of academic circle, it had grown out of the countless diurnal experiences of discrimination and abuse that was an indispensable part women's life. After securing political power, this movement then aimed to challenge the male hegemonized paradigm of legal rights, marriage rights, property rights, right to education, right to sexuality, reproductive rights and even the right to have control over one's own body. As soon as this movement gathered strength and momentum, even the remote parts of the world also started to get rattled by such an uproar for equality between the sexes.

This movement, as soon as it reached the Arab world, began to manifest itself in another form due to the fact that the issues addressed by the movements although remain almost same, but the battle is even more difficult in the Muslim world for its deeply entrenched religious social structure. Besides, the feminist movement that brewed a storm in the Western world failed to address some very culture specific issues in the Arab world and they also denied to display a spirit of solidarity with the Muslim women. Henceforth they maintained a distant relationship with them and Muslim women came to be termed as the sister 'Other'. Such an alienated status and nomenclature made it incumbent upon the Arabic women to emerge with their own version of feminism, now termed as Islamic feminism, which is based on the Quranic exegesis from an alternative feminist perspective, in order to do away with various heinous social practices prevalent in the Arab culture under the veil of religion. Nawal El Saadawi, through her grit and ruthless efforts emerged as one of the strongest and earliest voices of this school of feminism along with the likes of Asma Barlas, Margot Badran, Amina wadud, Fatima Mernissi and many more. What Saadawi presents in front of us in the form of the novel called *Woman at Point Zero* and through the life story of the protagonist, is the most realistic, gruesome and chilling account of the tragic predicament of the women of her society based on hegemonic androcentric culture and religious hypocrisy.

Firdaus will always be counted among one of the most powerful and immortal creations of Saadawi for being so fierce and proud of herself who thinks that she is elevated even above the kings and princes of the world by her self worth. The tragic and somber mood of the novel has been accurately encapsulated in the Forward of the book, penned down by famous critic Miriam Cooke, "What matters is that it unfolds a universal tragedy as great as any of Sophocles, even if without the epic heroes." Just like a tragic hero, Firdaus's proud and haughty attitude has been accentuated at the beginning of the novel through her repeated refusal to see the psychiatrist, who has undertaken several attempts at seeing her already but failed. It has been speculated that the book is autobiographical, as the figure of the psychiatrist is the fictional version of Saadawi herself who was conducting

a survey on the mental health of women at that time and Firdaus is based on a real life woman who had been condemned to death for perpetrating the murder of a man in the Qanatir prison in 1974.

The novel can be considered as an attempt on the part of Saadawi to subvert the stringent pattern of the patriarchal culture of her society and also an attack upon the literary traditions of the Arab world which reduces women to fictional constructs and define them in terms of their essential biological functions of reproduction and acting as sexual slaves. Saadawi, being an activist, decides to tread upon dangerous grounds in order to hit hard at the double standard of her society, where, at the one hand, women are compelled to hide themselves behind the veil, lest they reveal themselves as the object of temptation, but at the same time, that same society sanctions the physical exploitation of women for the sexual gratification of men. In such a social setting, women have been rendered voiceless and without agency, turning her being into a mere shadow- a society, in which women do not even have the authority to exercise control over her own body which the patriarchal society utilizes to achieve sexual satiety for men. The life of the protagonist, Firdaus , has been portrayed as being confined within the rubric of a brutal androcentric system. This has been reinforced by the analogy that the author draws between Firdaus and domestic animals, both of whom are awaiting execution.

The entire novel comprises of the life story of a prostitute , named Firdaus, which means paradise, but unfortunately her earthly life is a grim and bleak antithesis to the literal meaning of her name. The novel, in reality, is an exploration of the complex maze of interconnected themes like gender role, sexuality, politics, religion and prostitution, with an undercurrent of Lesbian relationship running in the texture of the narrative. The Lesbian subtext becomes evident right at the beginning of the novel, in the way in which the female psychiatrist gives expression to her impatience and longing to meet the prisoner and be privy to the fascinating tale she had to relate. The prison cell where the secret rendezvous takes place between the female doctor and the formidable prisoner resembles the structure of the womb, emphasizing not only the unshakable female bond, but

immediately foregrounding the strong flavor of Lesbian relationship, whereby Firdaus wastes no time to assume the role of a dominant lover, reducing the doctor to a mere recipient of the favor of the haughty prisoner who deigns to share her tale.

What follows next is an enthralling yet painful narrative of sexual abuse, rape, molestation, prostitution and the most heinous form of violence inflicted upon women. There is an urgency on the part of the prisoner as the hour of her execution is approaching fast and she forbids the silent listener from interrupting her tale. Although the omniscient narrator , being completely under the spell of the charismatic prisoner finds herself in a dream like trance, but she also assures the reader of the corporeality Firdaus, the corporeality which will be destroyed by hanging very soon. In spite of the presence of the lesbian sub text in the narrative, it is the heterosexual relationship which occupies major portion of the novel, causing utter misery to the protagonist, who, as if, gets trapped in the vicious circle of the masculine quagmire. Starting with her father who denies her food, the uncle who molests her, her abusive husband Shaykh Mahmud, the sexual exploiter Bayyumi and then the evil pimp, Marzouk- men are hardly presented in a positive light in the novel. The only glimmer of hope is seen in the figure the male prison physician, who is a staunch believer in the innocence of Firdaus. He even tried his best to get the sentence commuted but Firdaus firmly refused to sign the petition, as she is too proud and disillusioned to kneel down and beg for her life before a coercive society. In a way she is correct in not trying to avert the sentence- her earlier attempts to liberate herself from her degrading profession has come to naught. Despite acquiring secondary school certificate, she learns from the conversation between uncle and aunt that education is not for women. Bayyumi , even after knowing about her education, continues to physically exploit her and when she tries to persuade the school girls in the street of her school degree, she is reduced to an object of derision. Gradually the truth dawns upon her that in the society, it is her profession that defines her, rendering her education completely valueless.

The victimization and ill treatment of women begins right from the childhood and Saadawi draws a sordid picture of Firdaus's childhood in great details, when she has to engage herself in all sorts of ignominious activities at the bidding of her mother. As a child she had to carry "heavy earthen jars, full of water". Under the weight of the jar her neck would sometimes jerk backwards. She also was made to sweep under the animals and bake cowdung cakes- both of which are unhygienic and humiliating jobs. Even though her breasts were not even rounded, she catches men staring at her lasciviously, almost ready to pounce, "full of aggressiveness that seemed strangely servile." (Saadawi, 27). In her world, all men generally blend together to assume the shape of a malignant threat and her father is no exception, who beats her mother if a boy child dies but would have a peaceful supper if a girl child perishes. Like other men in the community, her father is a shrewd and cruel person who believes in prioritizing his own food and comfort, making his wife and children to go to bed in empty stomach. He is a thoroughly corrupt and sinful person who is adept in " 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, how to be quicker than his neighbors in stealing from the fields once the crop was ripe"(Saadawi, 48). No wonder the novel suggests a striking resemblance between the situations of women and buffaloes, both of whom are awaiting execution.

Replicating the view expressed in her non-fictional work, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, Saadawi in this novel too castigates patriarchal hegemony and misinterpretation of Islam which has perpetuated the abysmal condition of women in that society. Misuse of religion by men for ages had been instrumental in the creation of disgraceful status of women in Arab society. In this novel too we get abundant references to the Imam, Firdaus's father, her uncle and villagers who are apparently under the spell of the religious Friday sermon in which the Imam not only extols but equates the ruler with the almighty. This equation of the rulers with the God has been one of the issues that is being contested by the Islamic feminists who are determined to reopen the *ijtihad* or the logical interpretation of the Quran which had been closed after the sixth century by the rulers and the exegetes who

carried out the command of the rulers, in order to consolidate and reward them with unquestionable power . Afterwards the interpreters resorted to *ijma* or consensus, which is deemed as the strongest instrument of establishing male supremacy in the Arab society and the consequent denigration of women.

The novel also contains reference to one of the most reprehensible practices of the Arab world- female genital mutilation or female circumcision. Conservative Arab society comes to consider women only in terms of their physicality and the society does everything to curb the female sexuality, as they are deemed to be creatures of unbridled passion, who hold the power to distract men from their devotion to God. In her story, Firdaus recounts the horrific experience of undergoing the same practice, which again finds resonance in Saadawi's partly autobiographical non fiction *Hidden Face of Eve*, where the author not only narrates how her mother and other relatives carried out the brutal practice on her and her younger sister, but she also delves deeper as a psychologist, to analyze how the process traumatizes the victim as well as leads to permanent sexual frigidity of Arab women. Firdaus recollects in the course of her tale that before this act, she used to experience a sensual pleasure coming from an touching the most intimate part of her being, particularly during playing a game called " bride and bridegroom" with a boy called Mohammadain in a shelter, built in the middle of the field. But as she grows into a mature woman, she misses the pleasure she felt in her pre-circumcized state: " I no longer felt the strong sensation of pleasure that radiated from an unknown and yet familiar part of my body. I closed my eyes and tried to reach the pleasure I had known before but in vain. It was as if I could no longer recall the exact spot from which it used to arise, or as though a part of me , of my being, was gone and would never return."(Saadawi, 78) This dreadful act had sexually crippled her, rendering her unable to attain any pleasure. Throughout the narrative she was bound by the shackles of the repressive patriarchal system that denied her any right over her own body, hence resorting to brutal violence and murder remains her only means to reclaim her body.

In an entirely dismal and miserable life of Firdaus, love does come but did not bear sweet fruit, rather love comes to annihilate her faith in men completely and drives her all the more forcefully to embrace the profession of prostitution and value it more over all the other professions. She gets involved in two affairs- first one being in school which was based on admiration for a female teacher and hence unsanctioned by the society and then, when she takes up a job at a company, with the union leader who only pretends to love her, in order to physically exploit her. This relationship, although heterosexual and socially sanctioned, ruins her faith in men and in love too. From her tryst with office job, she draws the conclusion that the state of a prostitute is far better than the female office workers who has to offer their bodies to their superiors to get a small promotion, but its the housewives whose plight she pities the most as they have to provide their husbands with the free sexual services for an eternity. Firdaus's love experience in school and then in the company job are merely reflections of each other that completely disillusion her and sets her foot firmly on the road to perdition.

In the course of the novel, Firdaus finds herself trapped in a circle of sexual slavery. Infact one of the issues raised by the novel is who holds control over the body, as the female body has been equated with an usable commodity. This control over body has an innate connection with the act of eating, that nourishes the body. The act of eating, like sex, is a right sanctioned exclusively for men. Firdaus's father must go to bed in full belly, even if that means the children will sleep with empty stomach. After her marriage, she eats under the watchful eyes of the husband, lest she wastes any food which will result in walloping. Even when living with Bayyoumi as his mistress, Firdaus never dares to keep any good portion of food for herself. It is only after she earns ten pounds from a sexual encounter that she becomes able to afford a meal at a restaurant. She orders a roasted chicken. As the waiter leaves after placing the dish on the table, she realizes that it is for the first time in her life that she is able to eat, unhampered by any watchful male gaze. This also becomes the turning point of her life that makes her conscious of her body's worth. So three elements are intricately linked to each other: sex, money and food. It is by providing

sex to her clients that she is able to earn money which enables her to eat, an act essential for the nourishment of body.

But gradually in the course of the, it is the pursuit of money that will preoccupy Firdaus and again it is to ensure her ownership over the money she earns by selling her body, that she will commit the murder of the most evil and avaricious pimp, Marzouk , who wants a lion's share of her money. But her murder of Marzouk is also translated as the most defiant and powerful act on the part of the protagonist, who for most part of the novel, had been passive and has acted out only as the reaction of somebody else's action, the urge to run away being her most dominant reaction. So the act of killing her male oppressor has been considered as her attempt not only to rid herself of the that vicious character but also to destroy all the fiendish men of her society. This murder is also a big blow to the hypocrisy of the double standard of the Arab society, which on the one hand, circumcises women to curb their sexual appetite, but at the same time does not hesitate to turn a woman into a sexual slave to satiate their lust. Such a double standard finds expression in her words when she said that her society considers her a dishonorable woman, but “...honour required large sums of money to protect it, but that large sum of money could not be obtained without losing one's honour.”(Saadawi, 102). Firdaus could not stand such hypocrisy any more and determinedly lashes out through her act of destroying the arch-nemesis Marzouk, the representative of all the diabolical acts carried out by the male characters of the novel.

But the patriarchal society is a much stronger and well constructed entity and Firdaus is merely a tiny part of it, whose existence threatens to demolish the very structure of it. Firdaus realizes it :

“ They had condemned me to death not because I had killed a man...but because they are afraid to let me live. They know that as long as I am alive, they will not be safe, that I will kill them. My life means their death. My death means their life.”(Saadawi,105).

So in order to protect and keep the foundation of the patriarchal society intact and unshaken, Firdaus must be destroyed. Had it not been for the female psychologist, her extraordinary tale of ordeal and courage would also have been lost. The subject of the psychologist, unlike the subject of Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" who speaks only through her body after her death, can indeed speak, leaving us, at the end of the novel, enthralled with her mesmerizing tale.

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