

“My death means their life”: A Feminist Study of Body and Soul in Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero*

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Abstract

In Muslim societies the feminist ideals of empowerment and emancipation are regarded as “incompatible...imported...alien and hostile” (Aftab, 2011, p. 121). In this regard according to Saiti and Salti (1994) the works of Nawal El Saadawi have generated critical responses to Feminism in the East and the West. Saadawi has highlighted some of the very crucial feminist discourses in the Arab world in her novel Imra’ah ‘indanuqta al-sifr which was translated as Woman at Point Zero. In this paper we identify the character of Firdaus in Saadawi’s Woman at Point Zero as a woman’s struggle to find her identity in the socially and religiously degenerated society. As a mechanism to break out of the confines of oppressed patriarchal structures she is presented as a postmodern woman in the Muslim society through the use of her body to control men. She grows up in a dehumanized exploitative patriarchal culture, runs into severe problems in her Muslim society so she has to work her way out with different strategies; certainly not the ones set by her culture that support patriarchy but strategies borrowed from the West in the theories of third-wave feminism. Man-made patriarchal culture and society are not compatible with what Firdaus wants to be. According to Aftab (2011), the dangerous tendencies of “fundamentalism and extremism in both [their] religious and secular manifestations” (p.7) constitute many Muslim societies and hers as well and so she tries to resist the hypocritical structures of her cultural values. She is shown struggling to subvert the stereotypical concept of womanhood

by highlighting the stance of postmodernist feminism which enables women to realize the worth of their body and control men through it. The paper also shows how she gets caught up in the process of freedom finding with no solid space left for her existence as the so called Muslim Feminism and Western Feminism remain—as it emerges out in the novel—inappropriate for her to define her identity as a woman.

Key Terms: patriarchy, stereotyping, Muslim feminism, post feminism

Feminism as a form of critical consciousness enables individuals to critically analyze the dominant patriarchal social set up of the society. It takes into consideration all the “existing ideas, beliefs, customs, and practices, including scientific and religious knowledge” (Ramazanoglu, 2003, p. 140). Aftab (2011) is of the view that the current wave of Feminism has “revolutionized the mainstream feminist discourse with a variety of perceptions and opinions” (p.15) which can be identified with postmodernist interpretations of contemporary phenomena. Third-wave feminism presents “an intersectional and multiperspectival version of feminism” and promotes “multivocality” like pluralism in postmodern studies (Snyder, 2008, p. 175). In this context Caroline Ramazanoglu (2003) states, “[t]here is ample evidence from all over the world that women can and do struggle for themselves and for each other, but women are still subject to forces of conservatism and religious obedience in many areas which favour men” (p. 139). Such issues can best be studied in the literary works as Aftab (2011) mentions Louis Pratt in her work who thinks that there is always an “ideological dimension” (p. 10) in the convention of representation in fictional works and hence Saadawi brings the marginalized female subject in the center who challenges the dominant patriarchal culture.

Firdaus, the protagonist of *Woman at Point Zero*, throughout her life is seen as a ‘sex object’ and is reduced to body (Langtan, 2009, pp. 228-229). Like third-wave feminists she moves towards using sexual power as a resistance against oppression (p. 155). In her own version of feminist struggle in South African society Firdaus faces certain set of obstacles.

Firdaus challenges the idea of womanhood as set by the patriarchal structure around her. Her identity and selfhood is constantly evolving throughout the narrative. She tries to use and have control over her body and freedom to make her own choice. Third-wave feminists take body of the woman as a strength to control men and achieve a comprehensive sense of independence which otherwise would never be given to them by dominant groups of the society. In this regard Firdaus deconstructs the fixed identity of a woman in Egyptian society and transforms her body into “a site of rebellion” (Butler, 1990; Saadawi, 1980, p. 166). She secures authority by playfully engaging her femininity. According to Saadawi (1990) herself, Firdaus's story is about challenging and overcoming all the forces that deprive human beings of the basic right to live with love, peace and freedom (p. 402).

Firdaus is inhumanly exploited by the men in her society and she realizes that “[w]omen confined to the home are women controlled by men” (Ramazanoglu, 2003, p. 148). Soft and sweet by nature, she is made to accept that she has to be terribly hard to fight back as she is told, "Life is a snake. They [men] are the same.... 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" (Saadawi, 1983, p. 54).

Firdaus suffers exploitation and victimization. For men Firdaus is the metaphor for body (Bordo, 1993, p. 143). She is objectified and her worth is measured on the basis of the body parts she has and her personality is negated if she is incapable of being an instrument of pleasure for men (Bartky, 1990, p. 26). She becomes an object of gaze “continuously disappointed and abused” (Saiti&Salti, 1994, p. 158), is denied her subjectivity and treated as inert, possession (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 257), “Object of appetite” (Kant, 1963, p. 163), “luxuriant animal, a beast of pleasure to the rich, a beast of burden to the poor, a poor creature sacrificed to the pleasure of the male, ignorant and barbaric” (Mabro, 1991, p. 15). Firdaus finds herself caught in claustrophobic and suffocating norms of her society where she struggles to find “selfhood and being” (Aftab, 2011, p. 16) through prostitution as a way to freedom and liberation” but she does not compromise her essential nature of

giving her soul and tries to settle herself in the society by using her body. She struggles to break out of the confines in the form of prostitution. This challenge of being a prostitute to control her body according to her will take us to the current wave of Feminism which brings “new subjectivity in feminist voice” (Ruth, 2000, p. 96).

The sense of religiosity and morality are disdainful for her as they are used to serve the interests of patriarchy because as a result of the patriarchy-morality nexus, she is left with two options: “house bound or hell bound” (Khan, Saigol& Zia, 1994, p. 120). So she becomes an object of male desire and fantasy because of her physical beauty; the body becomes the “only significant qualification” for her (p. 39). Firdaus describes the hypocrisy of her men as she states:

The men I hated most of all were those who tried to give me advice, or told me that they wanted to rescue me from the life I was leading . . . they thought they were better than I was . . . they saw themselves in some kind of chivalrous role (Saadawi, 1983, p. 88).

She further points to this double standard of her society when she answers angrily one of her clients, “I am not a prostitute. But right from my early days my father, my uncle, my husband, all of them, taught me to grow up as a prostitute” (p. 99). Through her character it is highlighted how “[w]omen as wives and brides” suffer “hostility and oppression in a social order” (p. 113). Her determination till end proves her stance not to be scared of men and exercise her authority. She realizes that “she is the one who determines her value” (p. 55) and hence, challenges “what is normal, natural, and desirable” (Ramazanoglu, 2003, p. 148) in her society. She subverts the fixed and dominant norms of the society and is shown to become a postmodernist woman using her body to dominate men. But a closer analysis will reveal that the dwindling hypocritical standards of the society that oscillate between religious teachings and modernization (westernization) in the Egyptian culture as represented in the text make Firdaus confused to choose a path of freedom for herself. The misinterpretation of religion and radical ideas of western feminism

come in clash when it is applied on Firdaus's body. Her character is shown as a postmodern reframing of a woman who is ready to use her body as a weapon to fight back and not a tool to be exploited by men. One of the strategies she uses, thus, is challenging her subalternity. It is not her voice that speaks but her body that answers and establishes an authority to control men.

Firdaus's story challenges what it means to be a woman. If her character is examined drawing upon postfeminism, it may be seen that as she foregrounds her body to challenge patriarchal males, the oppressors, in the process she loses her soul. The question remains there and the recent debates in Feminism are inadequate in resolving the issue of female body versus soul. Is Firdaus happy to be a prostitute? No, because the ultimate freedom is again in subordination to the male, though she uses her body to control them but once again, it is the oppressor who is taking pleasure, and the inner self of Firdaus is never satisfied. How can she be satisfied when it is the oppressor's money that feeds her? She has to look towards the male to pay her so that she feels independent. This ambivalent conflict of soul and body is the ambivalent characteristic of the concept of freedom posed by the waves of feminism, be it the so called Muslim Feminism or Western Feminism. Both the strands of feminism fight for the identity of a woman but through a certain fixed angle where actual woman soul is often neglected. Saliba (1995) in her article is of the opinion that "[w]ith the hybridization of culture resultant from colonialism, ... women's bodies [have become] sites of resistance to both the internal "diseases" of the patriarchal class system and the external "disease" of Western colonialism/imperialism." (p. 133). In this regard Firdaus's body is constantly exploited as shown throughout the narrative and she keeps on struggling to find her identity.

Firdaus seeks to find what it is to be a woman. Is her identity the confined and deprived self, presented to her by the religious men of her society? The body image she carries with herself? The fake and compromised relationship of love with men? The free restless individual being played by everyone? These all confused forms of identity leave her to destroy her physicality by overusing it. She feels a subtle pleasure in

using her body to reject men at times but tries to preserve her soul by not submitting to men who are oppressors, and embraces death as ultimate relief from the oppression. She is furious to hear a pimp say, "There isn't a woman on earth who can protect herself" (Saadawi, 1983, p. 92), and in her "own ways of doing things" she kills him as soon as she finds out that "the law punishes women like [her], but turns a blind eye to what men do" (p. 92). She challenges the oppressors that no matter what happens, her soul will never submit and that she is the ultimate possessor of her innermost recesses of the body, the inner self, the soul. She also challenges all the women who remain in state of oppression and intensify the patriarchal dominance. She is determined to believe that "whatever the future holds will be more acceptable to her than the life she has left" (p. 188). Firdaus tells,

Yet not for a single moment did I have any doubts about my own integrity and honour as a woman. I knew that my profession had been invented by men, and that men were in control of both our worlds, the one on earth and the one in heaven. That men force women to sell their bodies at a price, and that the lowest paid body is that of a wife. All women are prostitutes of one kind or another. Because I was intelligent I preferred to be a free prostitute, rather than an enslaved wife. Every time I gave my body I charged the highest price...Everybody has a price, and every profession is paid a salary. The more respectable the profession, the higher the salary, and a person's price goes up as he climbs the social ladder. (p. 91)

Firdaus never gives up and at the end she plays the last part of her life by telling her story "to allow her individual act of challenge and defiance to become part of the public record of social opposition to the authoritarian political structures and patriarchal hierarchies of Egyptian society" (Harlow, 1987, p. 138). Firdaus's attempt to tell her story to be written is a victory as "writing back" to fight the oppressors (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1989). She fights to transform from instrument of repression into instrument of authority. In the processes of using her body to gain freedom she discovers her soul that can never be conquered by male.

Killing a man in self-defense makes her feel light and elated that she is powerful and can fight back if she wills. Destroying an oppressor is her achievement though the price of which she has to pay in the form of death sentence but it does not cripple her determination to embrace death as an honoured rejection of perverted and distorted patriarchal structures. She constructs her powerful identity by telling the “savage and dangerous” (Saadawi, 1983, p. 100) truth that “No woman can be a criminal. To be a criminal one must be a man” (p. 100). Men are afraid of her for she has “torn the mask away, and exposed the face of their ugly reality” and are afraid to let her live. She says, “My life means their death, my death means their life...The freedom I enjoy fills them with anger” (pp. 100-101). At the end she tells that death and truth require a great courage to face them and truth is like death which kills and so men “do not fear my knife. It is my truth which frightens them”. (p. 102)

For Baumgardner (as cited in Snyder, 2008, p. 177), “Feminism is something individual to each feminist” and therefore, Firdaus takes refuge in whatever form of authority she finds in a male-dominated society and its related patriarchal structures. She struggles to break free from the traditionally expected submissive roles that demand obedience and self-sacrifice. She never wants to be measured and judged against certain roles attached with her gender where she is expected to be passive, enduring and self-sacrificing woman. She rejects submission to any form of oppression of a woman that descends her to point zero. Rather, she dismantles all forms of standardization of feminist stance that teach woman to use themselves to become powerful and creates her own identity as she chooses death as method of her liberation just to give a powerful message that one has to be brave enough to confront the truth. She is not willing to bear the burden of cultural traditions that degrade and oppress woman. Barbara Harlow (1987) sees Firdaus’s willingness to let her story written down as a way “to allow her individual act of challenge and defiance to become part of the public record of social opposition to the authoritarian political structures and patriarchal hierarchies of Egyptian society” (138). Firdaus’s character adds a significant dimension to the misery of all those women who are seen by

the world as socially rebellious and independent as they secure control of their bodies in a life of prostitution. But their inside stories reveal their struggle to save the essence of their being; soul from brutal patriarchal chains they get caught into. This also represents that a woman always has to pay a huge price whenever it comes to gain her individuality; an independent position in patriarchal society, and in the case studied above the price is the loss of a precious life of a woman whose only desire was to be loved and respected as a human being.

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