

Feminist Discourse: Power, Sexuality and Gender in *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi

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Abstract

Feminism highlights women's contact with patriarchy, the long tradition of male rule in the society which muzzled women's voices, distorted their lives and treated their concerns as peripheral. This article examines Feminist Discourse: Power, Sexuality and Gender in Nawal El Saadawi *Woman at Point Zero*, through the perspective of Main stream Feminism and snail sense Feminism. Through qualitative methodology, the paper observed that power belongs to patriarchy, since the world has been male-dominated and governed for most part by the male. El Sadaawi reimaged Firdaus is a successful prostitute, therefore, becomes economically and socially relevant and validated what it means to be a woman. She reclaimed her body and shows her superiority by choosing who went into her bed, to the extent that she would not accept Heads of State sent to her by the government. She committed male-crimes by killing Marzouk and slapping an Arab Prince, and she felt it was beneath her to appeal to the government to commute her death sentence by hanging to life imprisonment. Firdaus could not be stereotyped as she faced death with the power of a lion. Therefore, she wrenched the power to name her from patriarchy, and redeemed her sexuality: reversed the fear and the dread of her gender on patriarchy.

Male-dominated, Inferior, Powerless, Patriarchy. Stereotyped

Introduction

Contemporary feminist literary criticism begins as much in the women's movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, as it does in the academy. Its antecedent goes back much further, of course, whether one takes Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* or even earlier text as a point of departure (Maggie Humm cites Inanna, a text written 2,000 years before the Bible that presents the fate of a goddess who questions sexual discourse) (Rivkin and Ryan 536). Feminism foregrounds women's experience under patriarchy, the long tradition of male rule in society which silenced women's voices, distorted their lives and treated their concerns as peripheral. Feminist criticism's self-transformations over the past several decades as it engages with both critique from within and encounters from without - encounters with psychoanalysis, Marxism, Post-structuralism, Ethnic Studies, Post-Colonial Studies and Lesbian and Gay Studies-have produced a complex proliferation of works not easily subsumed to a single description. The title of a recent collection of essays – *Conflicts in Feminism* – speaks to the situation of feminist criticism at the present: equality versus difference, cultural feminism versus Post Structuralism feminism, essentialism versus constructionism, Feminism and gender theory? Feminism or Gender theory? Feminism with ethnic specificity or with other crossing? Feminism National or Feminism International (Rivkin and Ryan 536), these complexities show more of progress as feminism meets societies at the point of their needs.

Over the years African and Black women have propounded feminist theories to

counter the pervasive and dominant influence of Western models as well as provide concepts that best articulate their own cultural and ideological agenda. These proponents include Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, Chikwenye Ogunyeme, Helen Chukwuman, Obioma Nneamake, Mary Kolawole, Catherine Acholonu. Chioma Opara, Akachi Ezeigbo to name but a few. I will interrogate the above text with the mainstream feminism and Akachi Ezeigbo's Snail Sense Feminism 'situated Feminism' (Ezeigbo:35), since she straddles between Western Feminism's individualism and African Womanism's communalism.

Woman at Point Zero is the story of Firdaus, who calls herself 'a successful prostitute' (11). She is imprisoned for killing a man, and is under sentence of death by hanging. After many refusals she decides to tell her-story to Nawal El Sadaawi, a psychiatrist doctor who visits her in Qanatir Prison Hospital in Egypt where the novel is set. Despite her misery and despair, she will not appeal to the government for a reversal of her sentence to life imprisonment. She challenges those forces that deprive human beings of their right to live, to love and have real freedom. She is filled with pride to undertake a journey to a place unknown to everybody on this earth. 'All my life I have been searching for something that fill me with pride, make me feel superior to everyone else. Including kings, princes and rulers' (11).

In the first-person pronoun, Firdaus narrates her very humble birth. Her father a peasant farmer, but constantly mates out vicious treatment on her mother especially at the death of the death of any malnourished male-child whom they breed like rats. She recalls her sexual encounters: with a playmate Mohammadain, (before her pharaonic circumcision), with her uncle, with her very sick husband, with Bayoumi, with the policemen on the streets, with the various men in Sherifa house, with Ibrahim, and with uncountable men as a full-time prostitute. she laments the ceiling put on her education by her uncle and his wife by marrying her out to a sick old man for 'a hundred pounds' (37), whereas she 'love school (21), and wished to become an engineer, or a lawyer, or a judge' (25).

She relates her encounters with the government to marginalize and use her to sexually service visiting Heads of State. She recounts her season of wealth, affluence and power as a successful prostitute: she once lived in a cozy apartment with full compliments of staff such a as cooks, stewards, drivers and other attendants, then she pays Newspaper Publishers to advertise her and her good deeds. She recalls her killing of the pimp Marzouk in self-defense, she memories her purgation of self from all tresses of prostitution, by tearing the highest amount of money ever paid her as a prostitute and slapping the Arab Prince that paid her. She celebrates her imprisonment and death sentence. Throughout the novel, Saadawi presents Firdaus to be ongoing search to increase and justify her self-worth. Firdaus learns to attain her self-worth in different ways from different people, however, each contributor of self-worth was dependent on money.

Woman at Point Zero has many critical acclaims for instance, 'Voice of oppressed from the margins. A Critical reading on El Saadawi's 'Woman at Point Zero' by Hashim H. Puthiyak, Woman at Point Zero at Store by Catherine Mansfield, Geda, Wondimu examined it under 'Deconstruction and Pluralist discourse in Saadawi's novels Woman at Point Zero and God dies at the Nile' to mention but a few. My perspective is Feminist. Discourse - Power, Sexuality and Gender.

The Arab society Saadawi presents is strictly governed by patriarchal ideology, where women are stripped of all forms of powers, even the power to be seen; a society where women are beaten and kicked about at the least provocation by the men. Women here are what Zora Neale Hurston calls 'de mule uh de world' (19). Firdaus remembers the toxic relationship between her parents: '... whenever my mother said something to him (my

father), he will jump at her and give her a beating' (64). He subjects his wife to domestic violence without justification, yet he is not a 'real' man, he cannot provide for his household. Her mother breeds children like rats. Firdaus says

For like most people, I had many brothers and sisters. They were like chicks, that multiple in spring, shiver in winter and lose their feathers, and then in summer are stricken with diarrhoea (sic), waste away quickly and one by one creep into a corner and die. When one of the female children died, my father would eat his supper, my mother would wash his legs, and then he would go to sleep ... when the child that died was a boy, he will beat my mother, then have his supper then lie down to sleep (18).

Firdaus' father fails in his biological role as a provider, yet the wife who feeds him is undermined and oppressed since society places no value the on women and the girl-child. Society treats them with contempt, so they can be wasted. Though her father is said to be a pious man who goes to mosque frequently, yet innately wicked. The privileged male with power and authority venges all forms of injustices on the woman and are justified by the system through religion and the law. Both the Western and African Feminists frown at the ill-treatment of woman and such docile reaction of Firdaus' mother and her lame display of powerlessness.

Patriarchy is sexist. It makes and enforces laws, and compel women to impose such laws on themselves and their female children even when these are detrimental to them, like female genital mutilation (FGM). This unhygienic, harmful and very painful procedure includes: clitoridectomy, excision, infibulation (or Pharaonic type) and the pricking or piecing, incising, scraping and cauterization. Firdaus laments 'mother one day brought a woman who was carrying a small knife or may be a razor blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from my thighs. I cried the whole night' (13). This traumatic event is always performed on young girls and maidens under eighteen years of age, and these youth live with this psychological, physical and mental trauma all their life time. Invariably, the women who have undergone this process: might contract deadly diseases and die, some might have difficulty walking, standing or sitting, they might appear quiet, anxious or depressed. And they might fail to enjoy sexual intercourse which is the main aim for patriarchy's insistence this obnoxious custom, since these oldies engage in child marriages and knowing they cannot satisfy them sexually.

Firdaus first affairs with Mohammadain and her second experience with her uncle are not comparable. She laments: 'though this time I did not feel 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' (15). Firdaus could not feel the same pleasure after her colitis was cut off, which is the full effect of what patriarchy achieved. She could no more enjoy sex. She could only feel the movement of her uncle's travelling hands surveying her private part. Firdaus reflects: It was as if I could no longer recall the exact spot which it used to arise, or as though a part of me, my being was gone and never return' (15). These young girls are not given any form of sexual orientation on how care for and defend themselves against sexual assault but they are simply dovetailed into cultural humility. The women who carry out this process, are what Lois Tyson calls 'patriarchal women' (81). They were once so inflicted and they cannot stop the cyclical evil because patriarchy has processed them for this duty over the centuries, that they feel they are doing themselves and their female children a favour. Feminists all over world, where this tradition is rife are challenging this very patriarchal error.

The patriarchal system in the text displays toxic masculinity, starting from Firdaus' nameless father, who though could not provide for his surplus children, but he is well-fed by

the wife, and has the effrontery to beat up this same wife at the death of his kwashiorkor children. Even Firdaus educated uncle, as soon as he formerly marries, he abandons her and treats as an under-privileged. Firdaus' ambition is to go back to school to become a lawyer or a medical doctor, but the uncle puts a glass ceiling over her. At the wife's instance, he gets her into forced-marriage to a toxic sick old man Sheikh Mahmoud, for only 'a hundred pounds' (37), with which his wife used to pay her debt and buy herself some underwear too (37). Firdaus' husband treats her like a slut, abusing her physically, mentally and psychologically, to the extent of starving her. When she reports these abuses to her uncle and his wife, they blame her as the victim, reminding her of her traditional gender roles which include condoning beating from a husband as the Qur'an prescribes. Similarly, Bayoumi, the coffee shop owner, who shelters her after running away from her toxic husband is equally as noxious. He abuses her sexually, physically, emotionally and psychologically. He calls her: 'You street walker, you low woman' (49). He brings in his friends to gang-rape her.

Rape culture is an ancient tool patriarchy has continued to adopt to humiliate the woman and to show patriarchy's animalistic nature. In Hurston's *Our Eyes were Watching God*, Nanny one of the Black characters begets her daughter Leavy through rape (23-24), and Leavy brings forth her daughter Janie through rape too (26-7). In Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, young Maya is raped at age eight by her mother's live-in-husband, Mr. Freeman (78), threatening her: 'And if you tell, I'm gonna kill Bailey' (78), and Bailey happens to be the Maya's only sibling and a bet one as that. In Amma Darko's *Faceless*. Poison, the street landlord and Onko both rape Baby T. (68). Fathers also rape their children for instance, in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Cholly Breedlove rapes and impregnates his daughter Pecola (125). In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Jim Trueblood rapes and impregnates his daughter (56), to mention but these few. Patriarchy is sickening with low down soul as they would not legislate again this abnormality. Elihue Micah Whitecomb (Soaphead Church) in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, is a pedophile, he gift-baits children with mints, money and ice-cream to molest them.

Again, Firdaus suffers bigotry, rejection and homelessness as she moves back to the streets into the hands of a toxic policeman (government agent), who arrests her as a duty: 'to clean the country and protect respectable families from the likes of you' (62), he rapes and throws her out in the rains, without paying the one pound he negotiated, he accosts her: 'what are you waiting for. I have no money on me tonight. I'll give you money the next time' (62). His action is predicated on the power and privileges he knows he has to undermine her sexuality. Ironically, only patriarchy patronizes prostitutes yet they make laws to keep them off the streets to protect 'respectable families'. Patriarchy thrives on benevolent sexism; Firdaus is oppressed because of her class and sex. Back on the streets aimless. The streets have become a safe-haven for her: 'Nothing in the street was capable of scaring me any longer, and the coldest of the wind could no longer bite into my body' (61), she has become immune to all forms of dangers, even the hostile weather condition.

At the banks of the Nile River, she meets Sharifa Salah el Dine, an older prostitute, a commodity feminist, who bonds with her only to make money off her as a younger prostitute, by providing her with shelter and assorted men. Firdaus laments:

I never used to leave the house. In fact, I never even left the bedroom. Day and night, I lay on the bed, crucified, and every hour a man would come in. There were so many of them. ... and their sweat ran copiously, filing my nostrils with foetid (sic) smell, like stagnant water ... I turned my face away but they insisted on pulling it back, on burying my nose in the smell of their bodies. They dug their long nails into my flesh and I would close my lips tightly trying to stifle any expression of pain, to hold back a scream ... often the man would hear it

and mutter stupidly into my ear 'Do you feel good' ... (57)

Some will bite her lips as they go into orgasm, some want and have oral sex and sex in all possible and impossible positions. They display all forms of toxic masculinity to show their power over her body. Prostitution, though one of the oldest professions gives no pleasure.

Firdaus, mistakes her fixation on Ibrahim for love. And for a moment she gives her body soul and spirit to him. But he goes ahead to marry the boss' daughter. Thence she remembers the question her friend Fathaye puts to her: 'Do you believe the words of love they whisper in the ears of penniless women like us' (83), she realizes that love has a price. Ibrahim's marriage to the Chairman's daughter gives him a bright future to look forward to, and he will quickly become a highflyer in the company. Patriarchy is patronizing. According to Karl Marx every relationship is economic in basis (Rice&Waugh:64). With a broken spirit, hardened and vengeful she moves into full time whoredom. Toxic masculinity objectifies women, Firdaus is seen as sex object. Every man she encounters wants her as paid prostitute or just to satisfy their sexual urge like Ibrahim and the Policemen on the streets.

Firdaus confesses: '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' (99). The inverse effects of patriarchy's suppression on Firdaus make her a misogynist, she confesses 'I hated men' (88), cause her depression. it gives her savage power, cause sexual violence. She uses her body only to make a living without fun or attachment to any man.

When rendering her services to Marzouk the Pimp, he tells her 'You ve never really known what it is to be in love. I am going to teach you'. She responds: 'I don't mix work with love' (93). For Firdaus, these indiscriminate sexual activities are strictly commercial rather than pleasure. She is simply a 'sex-worker'. And as sex-worker she feels detached from patriarchy who forces her into prostitution and frees herself from contaminated men. Therefore, when Marzouk – the most lethal of men - falls into her hands, seeking to possess her totally and control her sexuality, she becomes brutal. In the process she becomes a murderer in her self-defense. Toxic masculinity gives men power and superiority over women to abuse them in whatever way possible, until the woman stands up against them. In this instance, Marzouk comes to the scene when Firdaus has become spineless and soulless, just a sex-worker and nothing really counts but her money after the services rendered.

This freedom gives Firdaus the opportunity for body reclaim. She reclaims her body and chooses who comes into her bed. She recollects: 'One day a very important personality from foreign state heard about me. He arranged things in such a way that he could look me over without my noticing. Immediately after he sent for me, but I refused to go' (89). The man feels so defected, for a prostitute to stand up against his feeling of supremacy. He offers money even threatens to imprison her yet she stands her grounds. The policeman who is the negotiator further admonishes Firdaus that her refusal of 'a Head of State could be looked upon as an insult to a great man and lead to strained relations between two countries' (90). He accuses her of lacking love and patriotism for her country. She shuns male chauvinism by declaring that her body is her own and she will not subject herself to please a country that has done nothing for her but has taken away everything she might have had including her honour and dignity. Firdaus acknowledges: 'on one occasion they put me in prison because I turned down one of these important men' (90), as she comes to the realization that her body is her choice, she hires ones of the most highly renown lawyers and pays big sum of money to regain her freedom. A State that locks up its citizens in the 'Repressive State Apparatus' (Rice&Waugh:73), for failure to be immorally involved with other visiting Heads of States yet make laws prohibiting such live styles is low down rotten

and confused.

Patriarchy privileges men to oppress women. But Firdaus is emancipated from male chauvinism and savagely hardened. As a matter of 'truth' she kills Marzouk, one of the most influential pimps who appropriates her life and the lives of other numerous sex-workers, essentials like her. When she boasts to the Arab Prince who picked her up for a nice time, that she has killed a man, the Prince argues she could not kill anything even a mosquito. To prove herself she says: 'So I lifted my hand high up above my head and landed violently on his face. Now you can believe that I have slapped you. Burying a knife in your neck is just as easy and requires exactly the same movement' (99). By so doing Firdaus breaks away from gender stereotypes, she reverses the power of men to molest women without provocation. She shifts from that passive role society dictates for her to an active retaliating role she establishes for herself as an individual. Her doggedness and the ability to get round obstacles no matter how formidable (Ezeigbo:37), by exercising effective skills and sensitive attitude frees her from patriarchy's description of 'a woman', for to be 'a criminal one must be a man' (100). Firdaus becomes a radical feminist in an extremely patriarchal state to overcome dominance and objectification. In this masculine world, the feminists declare:

It is the man who defines what it means to be human not women. Because a woman is not a man, she becomes the 'other' the not-male. Man is subject and one who defines meaning, woman is the object, having her existence defined and determined by the male. The man is significant figure in the male/female relationship, while the female is subordinate (Bressler:107).

Firdaus challenges patriarchal meaning of the woman to establish cultural reorientation. Firdaus resistance to appeal to President for pardon as advised is predicated on the fact she has found a voice for herself. She swears, if she is let out of prison she will never stop killing, she wishes to die for the crime which she has committed. In the 'repressive state apparatus' she has become more hardened and blood thirsty she affirms: 'If I go out once again to the life which is yours I will never stop killing' (101). Moreso, she will not appeal to a government that imprisoned for refusing to be involved sexually with a visiting Head of State, as the government requests of her. Firdaus is so emancipated that bare-faced she can say, my body my choice as she exposes the face of the ugly reality of patriarchy, she becomes proactive in her quest for self-actualization.

The hegemony and rigidity the privileged male cast on women lead to social displacement of women (Davis&Schleifer:507), which does not allow the women privacy and economic freedom and prevent the woman from developing strength. Feminists war against the marginal positioning of woman in society the arts and the capitalist base of political and economic oppression and other injustices mated on the woman. El Sadaawi presents Firdaus a young woman, who has triumph over such hegemony. She becomes a successful prostitute and her yes is yes. She recovers her sexuality and patriarchy dreads her, she says: 'that is why they are afraid and in a hurry to execute me' (102). She will not live and die like her mother who remained powerless and voiceless and totally displaced by society.

Conclusion:

Some critics opine that feminist theory and practice appear to be a diffuse, loosely connected body of criticism that is more divided than unified, seemingly with a lot of discrepancy than togetherness(Bressler:107). In all these seemingly contradictory voices, however, there is a set of principles that unites this criticism. Feminists all over, women and men in all cultures and sub-cultures believe that both sexes should be valued as creative, rational beings who

can contribute to their societies and their world. In the feminists' quest they value divergent opinions, 'thereby giving significance to the personal as opposed to the school of theorists or a codified and in collection of texts' (Bressler:107). In a shifting of orientation and perception, El Sadaawi creates Firdaus an individual-centered young woman who dares to define herself rather than fit into molds of patriarchy's definition. She acquires that savage power from patriarchy and uses it against patriarchy as a vessel of telling the truth. As a western feminist she lives an individualistic life and while as Snail Sense Feminist, she exists in community. She dies as an individual with no regrets but significant.

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