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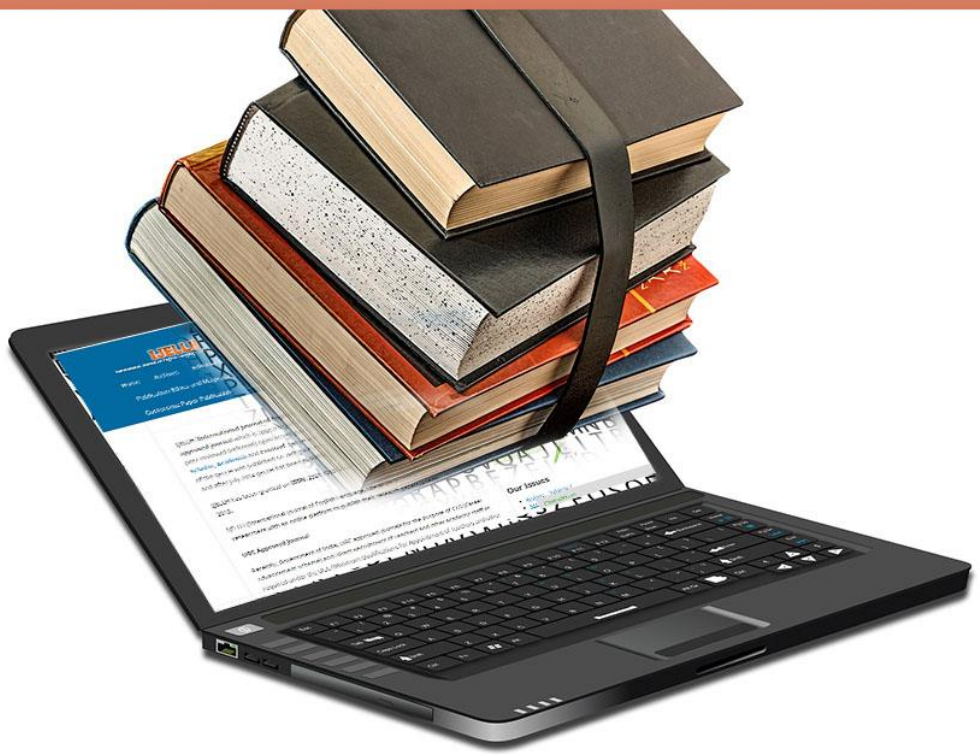

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Female and the outrageous Arab patriarchy: Analysing Nawal El Saadawi's "Woman at point zero" as a novel of female derision and melancholia

Abstract

"All my life I have seen searching for something that would fill me with pride, make me feel superior to everyone else, including kings, princes and rules. (El Saadawi: 1983)

The paper purports to catechize the Egyptian born Nawal EL Saadawi's *"woman at point zero"* in the *mise-en-scene* of the western feminist theories. The objective of this anatomizing and analysis is to corroborate and document a confabulation and outline the benefits of comparative feminist discourse with regard to patriarchal policies in the Middle East. The paper sternly but clearly adduces that El Saadawi strongly altercates the supremacy of a traditionally phallocentric society empowered by religion and masculinity. In "*Woman at Point Zero"* the author has impetuously reinterpreted disentangled culturally subdued dogmas and credos and deconstructed regressive traditions allied with patriarchal jurisdiction and sovereignty. Reckoning on her experience as a prison psychiatrist, El Saadawi grills a chauvinist culture that callously brutalizes women. She primarily aims to centralize the marginalized and give a voice as well as an agency to the voiceless. The author splendidly delineates the abuses, domestic aggression, rape, sexual frazzle and similar other social vices that the callous man eternalizes against women. To a very brobdingnagian extremity, the novel succeeds in consummating the culture of projecting the Arab women as defunct, moribund and obdurate object, yet the narration goes beyond the known liberal approach to conflict resolution in many similar great works of Afro-Arab writers. The writer industriously reinvestigates the face of feminism in the Arab world in a way that is antithetical to the

cherished values of women as compassionate human beings. The author presents a resilient, defiant and evil minded protagonist whose audacious revolt against the excruciating and onerous patriarchal culture leaves every reader bemused.

Keywords: Nawal EL Saadawi, feminism, patriarchal, chauvinist, phallocentric, supremacy, marginalized

Introduction

While giving vent to her smouldering interior, Nawal EL Saadawi in an interview ruefully gasps;

Interviewer: *what would you say to a woman in this country who assumes she is no longer suppressed; who believes women's liberation has been achieved?*

Nawal El saadawi: well I would think she is blind. Like many people who are blind to gender problems, to class problems, to international problems. She is blind to what is happening to her.

The dismal posture and status of woman has been earlier mentioned and discussed during the 16th century by Virginia Woolf. Virginia Woolf argues in her famous work *"A Room of one's own"* that, *women dominate poetry "from cover to cover" but are absent from history. I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without singing them, was often a woman"* In fiction, *a woman casts her spell over the lives of "kings and conquers"* but in reality, she is *"the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger."* In real life, contrary to their portrayals in literature, women *"could hardly read"* (Woolf 1957, 33). In the same context, Hélène Cixous argues;

"*the repression of women has been perpetuated over and over, more or less unconsciously, and in a manner that's frightening since it's often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction"* (Cixous 2001, 2043).She further puts it aptly in her ground-breaking, 'the Laugh of Medusa;

"I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could bust-burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a fortune. And I, too, said nothing, showed nothing; I didn't open my mouth, I didn't repaint my half of the world. I was ashamed. I was afraid, and I swallowed my shame and my fear. I said to myself: You are

mad! What's the meaning of these waves, these floods, these outbursts? Where is the ebullient infinite woman who...hasn't been ashamed of her strength? Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was made to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a ...divine composure), hasn't accused herself of being a monster? Who, feeling a funny desire stirring inside her (to sing, to write, to dare to speak, in short, to bring out something new), hasn't thought that she was sick? Well, her shameful sickness is that she resists death, that she makes trouble."

Nawal El Saadawi's *tour de force*, woman at point zero written as a fictional discourse summits the birth of a miscellaneous deconstructive scruple occurring from within academic feminism in the Middle East. Nawal El saadawi aims to launch a very scathing revolt against the male biased Arab writers who depict women in poor light. The writer very laboriously and daring delves into those narratives fraught with the components of male supremacy. She interrogates the narratives of major male Arab authors who marginalized women in their fictional roles and further takes into account the ethics of the phallocentric culture which she detests. Nawal E Saadawi tries and succeeds in recovering squashed discourse repartee and uncloaks the foregoing disdained and forlorn, concealed and undelineated voices yearning to come out of an acute miserableness.

It is important to know that Nawal El Saadawi is one of the most influential literary figures not only in Egypt but also worldwide. She has opened the gates for other writers to talk about these issues which were once impossible to talk about in such patriarchal societies. The main critical point is that she goes over and talks about things are not accepted here in the Middle East, as a result of this, she is now living in exile. She also has her own ideas about religion and religions matters, for example, she thinks that Muslims are still practicing some pagan features as they still practice kissing the black stone located in Mecca. As a deduction for reading some of Nawal El Saadawi's literary works or novels, the reader should take into consideration the complexity of Egyptian society today – in particular, Islamic fundamentalism and women's status. The techniques that she uses are oral literary traditions, woman's narrative, and imagery as techniques throughout her novels and novellas. She also concentrates on certain topics like female circumcision, gender roles, prostitution, honour killing. The emphasis throughout this research paper is on the Imagery and narrative as techniques. There will be a light spot on the female circumcision, gender roles and Nawal El Saadawi's books have concentrated on women, particularly Arab women, their sexuality and legal status. From the start, her writings were considered controversial and dangerous for the

society, and were banned in Egypt. As a result, El Saadawi was forced to publish her works in Beirut, Lebanon. Since she began to write, El Saadawi's books have concentrated on women particularly on Arab women their sexuality and their legal status. Although here works were denied by many people because of her insult to religion and politics or in other words she talks about what others don't talk about. She was imprisoned in 1980 but she continued to write in prison, using a pencil and a small roll of old toilet paper to write on it instead of paper. She was released in 1982, and in 1983 she published Memoirs from the Women's Prison. El Saadawi's life was threatened by those who opposed her work, mainly Islamic fundamentalists, and armed guards were stationed outside her house in Giza for several years until she lift the country to be a visiting professor at North American universities. Saadawi began writing early in her career. In 1972, she published her first work of non-fiction, Women and Sex, which evoked the antagonism of highly placed political and theological authorities and led to a dismissal at the Ministry of Health. Finally, El Saadawi is alive now and her literary works and books about women and humanity will stay alive forever. Her feminists work made a revolution against the government and the society especially the Egyptian rural society. In her essays and interviews, El Saadawi stringently attacks male Arab authors who regard women as fictional constructs or biological essences outside history and culture debunking the *"master narratives"* (Lyotard 1991, 19) of a masculine culture. Her fiction advances a feminist critique to patriarchal ideologies exposing what Elaine Showalter calls "the sins and errors of the past" and affirms a "disinterested" search for "essential difference" of "women's writing" (Showalter 1985, 247). In her novels, El Saadawi created what Kate Millett in his magum opus " *"sexual politics"* calls *"something of an anomaly, a hybrid, possibly a new mutation altogether, a criticism which takes into account the larger cultural context in which literature is conceived and produced'* (Millett 1970, xii). She consciously vindicates male oppression against women in a society, which callously brutalizes female sexuality under a religious veil. The novel painfully portrays the life of a woman rigidly confined within the boundaries of a brutal masculine system. Her being is defined by its rules, which reify a degraded concept of women by regarding them as property. Therefore, the author employs animal imagery to affiliate Firdaus, the protagonist, with cows and buffaloes in her father's barn. This imagery is becomes helpful to imagine the vicious ambience in which the protagonist suffers with hands doomed down. Moreover Firdaus symbolizes a domestic animal anticipating execution. She turns to be an object of disdain and the jibes she hears reduce her to mere wretched animal. In the beginning, the muted protagonist struggled to coexist with the most abusive practices of a merciless

environment. On the long run, she failed to tolerate the hypocrisy of a masculine society. The protagonist, who is driven to "the streets" and ultimately kills her pimp, recalls her painful memories retelling the story of her vengeance against her abusers prior to the night of her execution. The precariousness and severity of the protagonist accentuates and sternly stresses that sexual commodification is aggrandized by tradition and a corrupt religious system that consciously hitches women in the ambit of a vicious society. El Saadawi wants to say that women suffer a lot in life and should get freedom. They don't deserve whips and are not made to face the slings and arrows of male anger. According to her speeches in other books, she strongly reprobates the notion of polygamy which is practiced in some Muslim countries Islam. Polygamy to her is a menace that needs to be suppressed. The protagonist while giving vent to her smouldering interior utters dismally; they said *"you are a savage and dangerous woman."* At another occasion in the book, she reveals her plight; *"everybody has to di, Firdous. I will die, and you will die. The important thing is how to live until you die".*

Women under the feigned garb of genteelness of patriarchy suffered and suffered greatly.

Discussion

Nawal El-Sadaawi (2003) in her much cited essay "The Heroine in Arab Literature" reveals that:

"Among the male authors I have ever read, both in the West and in the Arab world, irrespective of the language in which they have written, or of the region from which they have come, not one has been able to free himself from this age-long image of women handed down to us from an ancient past, no matter how famous many of them have been for their passionate defence of human rights, human values and justice, and their vigorous resistance to oppression and tyranny in any norm". In her Autobiography "walking through fire: A Life of Nawal El Saadawi, she grievously espouses;

"Inciting women to rebel against the divine laws of Islam; this was the accusation that was levelled against me whenever I wrote or did anything to defend the rights of women against the injustices widespread in society. It followed me whenever I went, step by step, moved through the corridors or government administrations year after year, irrespective of who came to power, or of the regime that presided over the destinies f our people. It was only years later that i began to realize that the men and women who posed as the defenders of

Islamic morality and values were most often the ones who were undermining the real ethics and principles of society". (p. 520)

While mocking the literary oeuvre of the Arabian soil, She candidly and in a very pellucid way declares that Arab literary tradition is agglomerated with repugnant and abysmally ignominious conjure of women that has been lampooned since decades. In her book "A Thousand and One Night" to the contemporary literature, El-Sadaawi maintains that: *"Women continues to appear on the scene as a capricious vamp, a play-full and beautiful slave, a she- devil imbued with cunning and capable of a thousand artifices, an explosive danger versed in all arts of deceit and conspiracy, an evil spirit, wherever matters of sex and love are concerned".* She does not spare contemporary Arab writers. She lashes them with her utmost courage and doesn't fear of any execution. She has continued to fight against all forms of discrimination based on class, gender nation, race or religion. She contends that the image of women isn't hazy, but still remains immanent in the mind and emotions of the Arab people. For instance, she cited Tewfik Al-Hakim‟s the Sacred Bond as a text which portrays its protagonist as a woman who bears no loyalty or fidelity except to her baser instinct and physical desires, and who behaves very much like Akkad‟s heroine, Sarah, talking not the slightest account of religious, intellectual or social value. (p.522). She affirms that Naguib Mahfouz seems to be the most progressive so far among Arab writers of notable accomplishment in so far as his views of social justice are concerned. In most of his works, he promotes the right of women to education and to earn income in support of her family. The weaknesses he attributed to women are largely due to poverty and economic reason. However, he denies his female character personal freedom. Woman's success and achievement can only be meaningful within the context and limitation of patriarchal dictate. She is condemned if she oversteps the limit of morals and religion. In this case, Naguib‟s attitude and concept in relation to women do not substantially differ from those of his predecessors.

El-Sadaawi is an Islamic feminist. Her novel tells the story of a Muslim-woman character, Fridaus who is awaiting death row in Cairo prison for murdering a pimp. She confesses her crime without an iota of remorse or shame. Critics have described the novel as a product of a medical research undertaken by El-Sadaawi on the effect of neurosis on female prisoners in Egypt. The protagonist, Fridaus narrates her tragic life history to a woman psychologist. It is a story of lifetime oppression, abuse of right, abandonment and exploitation at all fronts. The novel unravels a series of bitter experiences of constant rejection by nearly every human

being that the protagonist encounters from childhood to adulthood. When Fridaus refers to all men as devilish individuals, she includes her father and uncles. She bitterly remarks that: My father, a poor peasant farmer, who could neither read nor write, knew very few things in life. How to grow crops, how to sell a buffalo poisoned by his enemies before it died, how to exchange his virgin daughter for a dowry when there was still time. How to beat his wife and makes her bite the dust each night. (p. 12) the oppressive attitude of men against women in the Arab society of Egypt forms the plot structure of the novel. In Woman at Point Zero, the Arab world is masculine, women are just appendage. The women in the novel do all the work, satisfy their husbands‟ urge, sleep without food, wash their husbands‟ feet and get beaten when a son or domestic animal dies. In this pattern, Fridaus reveals her precarious childhood experience. She uncovers the abuse of her mother by her father. She tells about her mysterious circumcision and the twisted molestation by her uncle. She narrates her betrayal by a lover. She is subsequently maltreated through sexual abuse by a pimp. She strives to live a responsible adult life but lacks the training with which to accomplish this. Her movement is closely monitored by her husband. She is also physically molested and sexually abused by him. She recounts her experience in this way:

"All day long he remained by my side in the house, or in the kitchen, watching me as I cooked or washed. If I dropped the packet of soap or spilled a few grains on the floor, he would jump up from his chair and complain at me for being careless. And if I pressed a little more firmly than usual on the spoon as I took ghee out of the tin for cooking, he would scream out in anger, and draw my attention to the fact that the contents were diminishing more rapidly than they should. When the dustman came to empty the refuse from the bin, he would go through it carefully before putting it out on the landing. One day he discovered some leftover scraps of food, and started yelling at me so loudly, that all the neighbours could hear. After this incident, he got into the habit of beating me whether he had a reason for it or not" (44).

'Woman at Point Zero' critically raises the moral question of women's liberation in Egypt as Arab women saw their counterparts in Europe and elsewhere in western societies being educated and played significant roles in social and political affairs. The novel depicts a clear devaluation of the female gender. For instance, the hectic dough kneeling work that Fridaus is apportioned to do as a routine rather than schooling appears too belabouring for a girl-child

of her age. When she reaches her breaking point, she laments thus; *"who was I? Who was my father? Was I going to spend my life sweeping the dug out from under the animals, carrying manure on my head, kneading dough and baking bread?* (p. 16) this outburst is a pointer to the denial of right to self- determination. Fridaus, like her male siblings, desires to enjoy some degree of liberty, recognition and attention.

The novelist strongly abnegates a narrative of an agonizing and torturous experience of Arab women who bewail and yammer fiercely under the oppression of religion and class. She reveals that marriage and family are institutions through which women are oppressed and relegated. The institution of marriage specifically engendered a master-slave relationship between husband and wife. The novel thus creates a character who defies the social institution of marriage, a character who expresses extreme hatred for all men. For instance, Fridaus declares that *"of all men I did get to know, every single man of them, has filled me with but one desire to lift up my hand and bring it smashing down on his face" (*p.6). Indeed, the miseries of Friduas from childhood culminated into her severe anger against all men. The men are not only portrayed heartless, wicked and selfish but also morally depraved. She sees all men in the same light of devilish character. Every man that has crossed her path and also contributed to her travails belongs to one highly respected status. She subsequently becomes one of the uptown prostitutes who dictate price and whose pimps are sons of wealthy Egyptian politicians and even career men she becomes prone to debauchery and profligacy and finds it a way to trounce all men. She appears and behaves like the Daniel Defoe's Moll Flanders in employing prostitution a tool of her longing in superseding the jurisdiction of patriarchy. With persistent one form of dejection or the other, Fridaus asserts that*: "I became aware of the fact that I hated all men, but for long years had hidden this secret carefully. Men that I hate 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. I used to hate them more than the others because they thought they were better than I and could help me change my life".* (p88) From this pent up anger and emotional hatred, she ends up murdering one of his pimps, Marzouk as a result of which she had to be killed. El-Sadaawi"s reaction to gender violence in Woman at Point Zero appears too radical and scandalous. To eliminate men as agents of oppression, she creates Friduas as an avenger, as killer of the wicked men in her row. Her pent up wrath touches the roof as she utters; *"My skin is soft, but my heart is cruel, and my bite is deadly".* According to Nnolim (2010. 201) women nurtured in Islamic religion should not contemplate murder as a way of resolving issues of any kind. When a woman goes beyond decent outrage under

Islam because her husband is a polygamist neither the religion nor society will come to her sympathy. In fact, such an act cannot change what Islam considers legitimate. Murdering a man who under Islam takes a second wife in fulfillment of his religion obligation is scandalously unjustifiable.

Nawal El Saadawi's critique of the way her society treats women is satiric and starkly represented in her masterpiece Woman at Point Zero (WPZ) (1983). It "is perhaps the most dramatic and accessible novel penned by her" (Malti-Douglas 1995, p. 27). Moreover, since the thematic purpose of this novel centers on the ill treatment of women, Malti-Douglas also described WPZ as a "searing feminist indictment of male-female relations" (1991, p. 137). the story of Firdaus encompasses many events which occurred during a span of almost three decades beginning from the 1950s. The novel is thus set in Egypt during this time frame. El Saadawi is a physician and psychiatrist who deals with traumatized, hysterical and psycho- neurotic women in Egyptian society and this is how she encounters the case of Firdaus in Al- Qanatir prison. While conducting research on neurosis in women, El Saadawi visits Al- Qanatir prison where she interviews Firdaus in the early 1970s. She learns about Firdaus's background and weaves her story into her novel.

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