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Empowering the Subaltern in *Woman at Point Zero*

Saddik Gohar¹

Abstract

In the context of Western feminist theory, this paper critically explores Nawal El Saadawi's celebrated novel, *Woman at Point Zero*. The aim of this analysis is to establish a dialogue and outline the benefits of comparative feminist discourse with regard to patriarchal policies in the Middle East. The paper argues that El Saadawi challenges the hegemony of a traditionally phallogocentric society empowered by religion and masculinity. In *Woman at Point Zero*, the author has effectively reinterpreted culturally dominated canons and deconstructed regressive traditions affiliated with patriarchal hegemony. Relying on her experience as a prison psychiatrist, El Saadawi interrogates a chauvinist culture that dehumanizes women. She primarily aims to centralize the marginalized and give a voice as well as an agency to the voiceless.

Keywords: Comparative Literature, Patriarchy, El Saadawi, Feminist Theory, Gender Studies, World Literature

Introduction

Discussing women's status during the sixteenth century, Virginia Woolf argues that women dominate poetry "from cover to cover" but are absent from history. In fiction, a woman casts her spell over the lives of "kings and conquerors" 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). The text's fictional discourse marks the beginning of a different deconstructive challenge emerging from within academic feminism in the Middle East. Questioning the ethics of a phallogocentric culture, El Saadawi interrogates the narratives of major male Arab authors who marginalized women in their fictional roles. In her novels, she recovers suppressed discourses and brings to light previously neglected, unheard and unrepresented voices.

Within a feminist literary creativity, novel-writing has become a point of reference for feminists and their opponents reflecting the shift in Arabic feminist literature born out of the widespread engagement with the historical indifference, hostilities and brutalities committed against women in this part of the world. Historically, Arab women have suffered from invisibility for centuries in societies sanctioning sexual violence against the female subalterns. On her part, El Saadawi develops a theory of feminist politics in the context of Arab-Islamic history from ancient times up to the present interrogating patriarchal ideologies and anti-feminist hegemony triggered by religion and reinforced in literature by male authors such as Naguib Mahfouz, Tayyeb Saleh,

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and others.² She openly challenges local critical movements, which ignore women writers and feminist scholarship. Her fiction, in the words of Adrienne Rich, invokes a “feminist criticism, which implies continuous and conscious accountability to the lives of women” (Rich 1986, 88).

In the last quarter of the twentieth-century, the Arab world has witnessed an uprising in literature triggered by local and Western developments in feminist movements. This globally oriented movement aims to subvert and deconstruct male-oriented genres deeply rooted in a macho culture and reinforced by androcentric traditions. Due to the ruthless efforts of Arab feminists, particularly El Saadawi, Egypt and other parts in the Arab world witnessed a major transition. Sherifa Zuhur describes this change as follows: “women's transition from the harem to corporate and governmental offices” simultaneously triggers an overwhelming feminist awakening and an enormous corpus of “serious literature dealing with gender issues” (Zuhur 2010, 68). In *Woman at Point Zero*,³ El Saadawi introduces a sophisticated vision of the status of women in Arab culture from a feminist perspective opposing traditional trends tackling female issues. The novel marks a significant shift of emphasis providing a striking feminist poetics able to revise and squarely confront androcentric theories such as Harold Bloom's vision deployed in *Anxiety of Influence*. Bloom envisions poets as sons and fathers, viewing women writers as “Milton's daughters” narrating “the story that all literary women would tell if they could speak their speechless woe” (cited in Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 89).

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. El Saadawi identifies as patriarchal those inherited values and traditions that passed from generation to generation and aim to marginalize and disempower women. 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 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).

In *Woman*, El Saadawi invades taboo territories in Arab culture. She intentionally exonerates male brutalities against women in a society, which viciously suppresses 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 uses animal imagery to affiliate Firdaus, the protagonist, with cows and buffaloes in her father's barn. Symbolically Firdaus is depicted as a domestic animal anticipating execution. 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 hanging. The plight of the protagonist emphasizes that sexual commodification is augmented by tradition and a corrupt religious system that deliberately confines women in the periphery of society.

² See the following articles by Saddik Gohar: 1- “Narrating the Marginalized Oriental Female: Silencing the Colonized Subaltern”. *Acta Neophilologica* 48.1.2 (2015): 49-66. 2- “Orientalizing The Female Protagonist in Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*.” *Forum for World Literature Studies*. Vol.7. No. 4. (2015).

³ It will be referred to as *Woman* in the text of the paper.

Throughout *Woman*, the protagonist is oppressed by a perverted moral paradigm, which severely limits her sexual identity, and at the same time condones domestic violence and sexual abuse. She fails to renegotiate her sexual desire due to lifetime abuse and mistreatment. As a child, she was brutally abused by a primitive circumcision ritual. In several occasions, Firdaus tries very hard to break this silence and transcend the wound but she fails. Paradoxically, she is able to discover her voice and achieve an epiphany of self-realization only after killing her male abuser and oppressor. In this context, one can argue that in El Saadawi's fictional microcosm, female self-empowerment is fulfilled through counter-violence which enables the woman to liberate her body, both as a private and public space, from patriarchal domination.

Confronting Patriarchal Hegemony

In her foreword to *Woman*, Miriam Cooke refers to a drama emerging between two figures in “the cell of a woman the night before her execution.” The novel, according to Cooke, “unfolds a universal tragedy as great as any of Sophocles, even if without the epic heroes” (Cooke 1983, vii). El Sadaawi has explained that the events of the novel were inspired by an encounter with a woman in the infamous Qanatir prison in Egypt in 1974. The woman was convicted of murdering a man and consequently sentenced to death by hanging. At that time, the author, originally a doctor specialized in psychiatry, was undertaking a major research on Egyptian women suffering from psychological disturbances and neurosis. El Saadawi was able to meet Firdaus, the protagonist of the novel, with the help of a male doctor working in the prison’s hospital. In an interview with Fedwa Malti-Douglas and Allen Douglas (1986), she emphasizes the effect of the prison encounter on her writing: “I was so affected by this real woman, that I wrote it as it was. Imagination is only twenty percent, maybe ten percent” (Badran/Cooke 1990, 402).

In the beginning, Firdaus was silent and refused to meet or talk with anyone but finally she accepted to tell her story to the author/doctor. Firdaus courageously made her confession narrating the events leading to her imprisonment though she was aware of her destiny: “Tomorrow morning I shall no longer be here”. El Saadawi was impressed by the stern look in her eyes, her courage, her absolute refusal to live and her fearlessness of death. In her preface to *Woman*, the author stated “I developed a feeling of admiration for this woman” (El Saadawi 1983, xi). Regardless of her poverty and miserable life, Firdaus was proud of herself. She feels superior to all men including “kings, princes and rulers.”⁴ Victimized by a legal system grounded in a merciless patriarchal society, which underestimated women, Firdaus was executed because of killing her pimp in self-defense. Catherine Clément and Hélène Cixous denounce the “dual, hierarchical oppositions” set up by the traditional phallogocentric philosophy of determinateness, wherein “death is always at work” as “the premise of woman's abasement,” women who has been “colonized” by phallogocentric thinking (Clément and Cixous 1986, 65).

Victimized by a culture, which breeds self-loathing and self-hatred in the female subaltern, Firdaus is forced to sacrifice her body to a male-oriented world turning her into a shadow. In *Woman*, El Saadawi attempts to restore the lost body of Firdaus who was physically and psychologically repressed. By regaining herself via murder, Firdaus finds her authentic voice in addition to “her pleasures, her organs, and her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal” (Cixous 2001, 2044). After several attempts on the part of the female author, Firdaus made a confession: “Let me speak. Do not interrupt me. I have no time to listen to you” (1983, 9).

⁴ Nawal El Saadawi. 1983. *Woman at Point Zero*. Trans. Sherif Hetata. London: Zed Books. P.9. All subsequent citations in the text will be taken from this version.

She starts her narrative by recalling disturbing childhood memories associating men with brutality and deceit. She suffered from subjugation throughout her life particularly in her childhood at a time when her “breasts were not yet rounded” (1983:11).

In her preface to *Woman*, El Saadawi emphasizes that the novel “is a story of a woman driven by despair to the darkest ends.” She also points out that this desperate woman “evoked in all those who witnessed the final moments of her life, a need to challenge and to overcome those forces that deprive human beings of their right to live, to love and to real freedom” (1983, xii). As a child, Firdaus was forced to carry “heavy earthenware jars, full of water” on her head. Under the weight of the jars, her neck would jerk back and forth. She was also forced to “sweep under the animals and then make rows of dung cakes” (1983, 12), which is an unsanitary, and humiliating task assigned only to women in the Egyptian countryside. During puberty, she was subjected to the aggressive masculine gaze: “I knew nothing about men but I observed them constantly scratching under the armpits and between the thighs” watching her with “wary, doubting, stealthy eyes” (1983, 11).

For Firdaus, men from all walks of life eventually blend into a threat. Her father, for example, resembled the other men in her community so closely that it was hard to identify him. Like all men in the village, her father is a cruel and barbaric person who frequently beats his wife and makes her “bite the dust each night.” When one of the young sisters of Firdaus died in infancy, her father did not care but when a male baby died he “would beat my mother” (1983, 17). Like other men in the rural community, her father is a selfish person who seeks his pleasures securing food for himself only, even if the other members in the family sleep with empty stomachs. Firdaus, the central narrator, describes her father in a disgusting way viewing him in the image of a ravenous camel: “His mouth was like that of a camel, with a big opening and wide jaws. His upper jaw kept clamping down on his lower jaw with a loud grinding noise, and chewed through morsel so thoroughly that we could hear his teeth striking against each other.” (1983, 18).

In her non-fictional study, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, El Saadawi demonstrates that economic and political hegemony and radical misinterpretation of Islam and use of religion as “an instrument of fear, oppression and exploitation” are “the reasons for the low status of women” in Arab societies (1982:41). Religion plays a considerable role in the narrative of *Woman*, punctuated by references to the Imam of the mosque, the father of Firdaus, her uncle and the village folks hypnotized by fake religious sermons. In the novel, religion is strongly connected to patriarchy and the exercise of power. Religion is used as a repressive apparatus by “economic and political forces” aiming to crush women isolating them in the harem ghetto.

Throughout the eyes of Firdaus, the author refers to the power of religion as an instrument of oppression and one of the subjugating pillars of male-dominated societies. She elaborates on the theme of religious hypocrisy rampant in the village community where the protagonist spent her childhood. Firdaus narrates that her father, like other men, is a hypocrite who knows “how to bend over the headman’s hand and pretend to kiss it”. Every Friday her father goes to the mosque to attend the Friday sermon. The eloquent Imam speaks about love of one’s country and absolute obedience to the ruler because “love of the ruler and love for Allah were one and indivisible.” The Imam usually prays to Allah to “protect our ruler for many long years and may he remain a source of inspiration and strength to our country, the Arab Nation and all Mankind” (1983, 11).

Conversely, the Imam never says that “stealing was a sin, and killing was a sin, and defaming the honor of a woman was a sin, and injustice was a sin, and beating another human being was a sin.” (1983:12). Using innovative writing style and new modes of description and narrative representation to explore how women’s lives were influenced by what Arlene Macleod

calls the “layered and overlapping bastion of oppressors” (Macleod 1991, 68). El Saadawi condemns local restrictive socio-historical traditions solidifying women's subjugation. She also denounces economic and patriarchal policies contributing to the proliferation of corruption and religious hypocrisy.

In *Woman*, El Saadawi negotiates the discursive articulation of female identity challenging a patriarchal system. Her protagonist struggles against “the pressures of poverty, patriarchy, marriage and social customs that assail her.” (Fonchingong 2006, 136) The story of Firdaus is a replica of contemporary Arab women struggling against male hegemony, supremacy and stagnant religious heritage. The façade of religiosity and piety epitomized by Friday sermons and ritualistic worship conceals a corrupt and immoral male-dominated society. Firdaus told the author that her father is a thief who like other men in the village is “quicker than his neighbor in stealing from the fields once the crop was ripe.” He is a peasant who only knows “how to sell a buffalo poisoned by his enemy before it died, how to exchange his virgin daughter for a dowry” (1983, 10).

The connection between selling the buffalo in order to be slaughtered and selling the virgin girl to an elderly husband in return for a dowry carries complex symbolic connotations in the text. In *Woman*, there is a recurrent analogy between women and animals particularly female buffaloes and cows as opposed to the image of the father as a camel. In her harrowing confession, she reveals the scars of living in a repressive patriarchal society which crushes women particularly the weak and the marginalized: “Each time I picked up a newspaper and found the picture of a man who was one of them, I would spit on it.” She continued: “Every single man I did get to know filled me with but one desire: to lift my hand and bring it smashing down on his face. But because I am a woman I have never had the courage to lift my hand” (1983:11). Though biological determinism is treacherous landscape in feminist studies it is noteworthy to demonstrate that women, unlike men, are represented as having lives determined by bodily functions⁵ particularly in male-dominated communities across the Middle East.

Mutilating and Abusing the Female Body

Historically, conservative societies have attempted to define women in terms of their physical characteristics, and patriarchal oppression of women is often rationalized by reference to those characteristics. Throughout the confession of Firdaus, El Saadawi elaborates on the topic of sexual abuse targeting female children in Egypt and the Arab world. In her tale, Firdaus reveals terrifying details about her experience with female genital mutilation,⁶ which initially aims to curtail women’s sexuality. She forcibly underwent this ordeal in her early childhood. In the

⁵ Elizabeth Spelman rejects this premise relating feminism’s “negative attitude toward the body “with western ‘solipsism in feminist thought’ and significantly, with “the idea that the work of the body and for the body has no part in real human dignity” (Spelman1988:127). See, Elizabeth Spelman. 1988. *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*. Boston: Beacon.

⁶ In rural Egypt, Gaza and some African countries such as the Sudan, female circumcision has various forms including the removal of the tip of the clitoris (the prepuce) as in Sunni Islam or cliterodectomy: the removal of the entire clitoris including the prepuce and the glans together with the adjacent labia. Infibulation is the most severe form of circumcision which includes the removal of the clitoris, the adjacent labia and joining the scraped sides of the vulva across the vagina. The sides are sewn with thread or catgut. An opening is left as a passage of urine and menstrual blood. An infibulated girl should be cut open during the wedding night to facilitate intercourse and is closed again to secure fidelity. The ritual takes place using unsanitary tools such as kitchen knives, broken glass or shaving razors. Some girls die during the procedure due to hemorrhaging or shock.

beginning, her mother started to beat her, “then she brought a woman who was carrying a small knife or maybe a razor blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from between my thighs” (1983, 12).

Prior to this brutal act of female genital mutilation (FGM), Firdaus was able to feel sexual pleasure by touching the clitoris. This sensation was experienced for the first time during a childhood sexual initiation ritual called in Egypt the “bride and bridegroom” game. Playing with a boy, named Mohammadain, from the neighborhood in a shelter made of maize stalks and located in the fields, she used to observe him as he was lifting her lower dress and haphazardly touching a sensitive spot in her body: “From some part in my body, where exactly I did not know, would come a sensation of sharp pleasure” (1983, 12). Numerous studies on FGM, which is not the concern of this paper, have demonstrated its traumatic consequences in particular in the context of female sexuality.

As Firdaus grows into maturity, the pre-circumcision pleasure enjoyed during the game with the young boy is lost: “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” (1983, 13). After a talk with Wafeya, a high school comrade, about potential erotic love experiences in the past, Firdaus struggled to regain some memories from the pre-circumcision time. In a vision, she saw Mohammadain lying on a bed of straw under the open shelter, then “The touch of his fingers moved over my body. My whole body shuddered with a faraway yet familiar pleasure arising from some unknown source, from some indefinable spot outside my being” (1983, 25).

El Saadawi’s fictional representations of the female body echoes the perspectives of Hélène Cixous and Gayatri Spivak on female desire which runs counter to what Elizabeth Spelman calls the “fear and disdain of the body” (Spelman 1988, 126). In her discussion of desire, Cixous does not associate female sexual pleasure precisely with the clitoris but locates it throughout the body. She envisioned the female body as possessing “thousand and one thresholds of ardor” and its “profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction” (Cited in Gohar 2009, 21). In a connected scenario, Spivak refers to the clitoris as something suppressed or invalidated in the interest of defining “woman as sex object, or as means or agent of reproduction” (Spivak 1988, 151). According to Spivak, the clitoris is “the women’s excess in all areas of production and practice” (Spivak 1988, 82) because female sexual pleasure is divorced from reproduction.

Forbidden from celebrating her sexuality, Firdaus does not fit into the two categories identified by Spivak and Cixous who explored the specificity of the female body focusing on issues related to the localized reclamation of sexuality. The horrible circumcision of Firdaus has limited her sense of desire resulting in difficulty in attaining sexual pleasure. Throughout the narrative, she reminiscences over moments of pleasure prior to her cliterodectomy. As a victim of brutal genital mutilation, Firdaus symbolically and biologically lost the clitoris. Therefore, she fails to center her pleasure on the point that “exceeds” male subjugation of her body. At the same time, she is disempowered from regaining her body from the fetters of a repressive patriarchal system entrenched in a tyrannical religious milieu. Violence was the only option left for Firdaus to reclaim her lost identity and mutilated sexuality.

In *Woman*, the author criticizes the fears and horrors of female genital mutilation and other forms of sexual abuse, which annihilate female identities making women vulnerable to male violence and domination. In addition to the trauma integral to her cliterodectomy, Firdaus suffered from the memory of incest and rape as the male members of her family sporadically harassed her. In *The Hidden Face of Eve*, El Saadawi unabashedly refers to frequent incestuous relationships

and sexual harassment of female children in the Middle East at the hands of close relatives or family members. The society avoids disclosing such brutalities and the male offenders never admit them, but they “remain hidden, stored up in the secret recesses of the female child’s self since she dare not tell anyone of what has happened to her” (1982: 14).

Falling into the Masculine Quagmire

Firdaus’ uncle, an incarnation of religious hypocrisy, schemes to marry off Firdaus to an older man, planning to use her dowry to pay off his debts. Having no other options, Firdaus succumbs to the wishes of her uncle and marries the old man. The old man beats her, but uncle justifies the atrocity on religious grounds. He tells her that “all husbands beat their wives” (1983, 46), particularly those men who are well versed in their religion. When her husband, Sheikh Mahmoud, brutally beats Firdaus with his heavy stick until the blood runs from her nose and ears, she escapes into the streets with a bruised face and swollen eyes. She meets with Bayoumi, a poor waiter, who takes her to his small flat located in the slums. His voice and facial features remind Firdaus of her father. In return for offering her lodging, Firdaus gives Bayoumi her body: “I ended up by sleeping in his bed throughout the winter and the following summer” (1983, 51). In the beginning, she enjoyed the sexual relationship, under the assumption that he would marry her: “My body pulsed with an obscure pleasure, or with a pain that was not pain really pain but pleasure, with a pleasure I had never known before” (1983, 51). However, the situation quickly changes, as Bayoumi becomes her new oppressor.

Eventually, Firdaus asks Bayoumi to either marry her or let her seek a job, telling him that she would not be able to live with him anymore in the same flat as a prostitute. He becomes extremely angry. Like her ex-husband, Bayoumi beats her violently. Bayoumi essentially turns the flat into a prison of enforced prostitution for Firdaus. He locks her inside, and at night rapes her by force: “I lay there under him without movement, emptied of all desires, or pleasure, or even pain, feeling nothing. A dead body with no life in it at all, like a piece of wood, or an empty sock, or a shoe” (1983, 53). With the passage of time, Bayoumi starts to bring his friends over who rape Firdaus. With the help of a neighbor, Firdaus is able to escape from the apartment and finds herself in the streets of the merciless city once again. On the banks of the Nile, near a wealthy district in Cairo, Firdaus meets with an aging prostitute named Sharifa Salah Eldin. The ironical connotations of the prostitute’s name are integral to the anti-patriarchal motif deeply seated in the novel. “Sharifa” in Arabic means “a chaste woman who is highly concerned with protecting her honor and reputation.” At the hands of Sharifa, Firdaus is trained as a professional prostitute. Sharifa tells her that she has great potential: she is young, educated and her body is sexy, particularly her thighs which are full, tight and muscular.

Firdaus begins to receive her customers in Sharifa’s expensive flat overlooking the Nile River. She describes the intercourse as pleasure mixed with pain, “like a thing arising out of an ancient wound, in an organ which had ceased to be mine, on the body of a woman who was on longer me” (1983, 60). When she complains to Sharifa, the well-versed prostitute replied: “Firdaus, we just work. Don’t mix feeling with work. You will get nothing out of feeling except pain” (1983, 60). Firdaus thus continues her life as a prostitute, engaging in a series of progressively more violent and exploitative encounters, culminating in a fight between Fawzy, the pimp, and Sharifa. Firdaus escapes and decides to start serving her own clients under her own management.

After her sexual encounter with a famous journalist, Mr. Di'aa, during which he humiliates her calling her a disrespectable woman, she decides to give up prostitution. Thanks to her secondary school certificate, she is able to get a job in a company. In the beginning, she is happy with the new career. However, she finds that the sexual harassment she receives from a socially acceptable job is even greater than that endured while being a prostitute: "As a prostitute, I had been looked upon with more respect, and been valued more highly than all the female employees. My body was never hemmed in by other bodies in the bus, nor was it a prey to male organs pressing up against it from in front and behind. Its price was not cheap" (1983, 81). However, some good does come from the new change in work, as she meets Ibrahim, the revolutionary chair of a committee devoted to defending workers' rights. Ibrahim emerges as a hero among the company's employees because of his brave confrontations with the administration and the owner of the company.

Firdaus genuinely falls in love with Ibrahim and joins his committee after he proposes to marry her. She gives him her body willingly out of love and adoration, but is horrified to discover that he will marry the daughter of the company's owner. As the relationship with Ibrahim is the only true love affair she experienced in her life, his impending marriage is a destructive blow to Firdaus. After discovering his betrayal, she blames herself because she offered her body and soul to a man who embodies hypocrisy and opportunism. This moment of disillusionment is also a moment of illumination and self-realization. She realizes that "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 chastise them with menial services for life, or insults, or blows" (1983, 82).

Thus, Firdaus learns to hate men because they remind women that they are low. She becomes aware that prostitution is a profession invented by men who force women to sell their bodies at a cheap price. She also ironically realizes that "the lowest paid body is that of a wife" (1983, 99). After breaking her relationship with Ibrahim, Firdaus refuses an invitation from a powerful man, a guest coming from an important foreign state. However, policemen, who are supposed to protect the honor of local women, worked as pimps, struggling to convince her to meet with the foreign delegate. Local police officers offered money in return for having sex with the guest, and then threaten her with prison after she refuses the offer.

Finally, a high-ranking policeman explains to Firdaus "that refusing a Head of State could be looked upon as an insult to a great man and will lead to strained relations between the two countries" (1983, 98). He tells her that she has to have sex with the guest in order to prove she is a patriot who loves her country. However, Firdaus is aware of the hypocrisy, that the senior police officer "wanted to take a prostitute to this important personality's bed, like any common pimp would do" while talking "in dignified tones of patriotism and moral principles" (1983, 98). Firdaus insists on rejecting the offer, telling the officer: "My body is my property alone, but the land of our country was theirs to own" (1983, 99).

As the events approach their tragic end, Firdaus meets the most vicious male character in the novel, Marzouk, the pimp who takes her earnings by force. He offers bribes to crooked policemen and is well connected with corrupt lawyers and judges. He tells Firdaus that he does not mix love with business: "My capital is women's bodies" (1983, 101). After several years of enslavement at the hands of Marzouk, Firdaus decides to leave him and give up prostitution forever, but he prevents her from leaving. They exchange blows: "He lift his arm up in the air and slapped me. I raised my hand even higher than he had done, and brought it down violently on his

face. The white of his eyes went red.” In the frenzy, Marzouk viciously attacks Firdaus with a knife. She is able to snatch it and kill him. Firdaus describes the brutal encounter: “[I] buried it deep in his neck, pulled it out of his neck and then thrust it deep into his chest, pulled it out of his chest and plunged it deep into his belly. I struck the knife into almost every part of his body” (1983, 104).

Having killed the pimp, Firdaus walks the streets of the city. She is picked up by a prince from a neighboring country. He gives her money, as he believes she is a high-class woman. Although she takes the money, Firdaus verbally assaults the prince: “You are no better than an insect, and all you do is to spend the thousands you take from your starving people on prostitutes” (1983, 109). He calls the police, and when they arrive she turns on them: “You are criminals, all of you: the fathers, the uncles, the husbands, the pimps, the lawyers, the doctors, the journalists, and all men of all profession” (1983, 110).

After these encounters, Firdaus feels triumphant and exalted. She confessed to the author that she did not regret killing the pimp. She takes pride in herself because she has finally succeeded in scaring men: “They were so afraid of me. I was the only woman who had torn the mask away, and exposed the face of their ugly reality. They condemned me to death not because I had killed a man- there are thousands of people being killed every day- but because they are afraid to let me live” (1983, 110). Through the act of murder, Firdaus regains her lost identity, avenging herself against the atrocities of a male-oriented world. For her entire life, Firdaus was silenced in multiple ways by her father, her mother, her uncle, sheikh Mahmoud, her pimp, the Cairo prostitute, and others. Murdering Marzouk liberated her. She is not a subaltern anymore as she succeeds in restoring her voice and breaking her silence. The narrative ends with Firdaus expressing her indifference toward death. Firdaus is hanged not for murdering a pimp in self-defense, but because she exposes the evil latent in a corrupt socio-religious structure and a stagnant hierarchal system.

By the end of the novel, El Saadawi castigates the ideology of the prison system and the judicial network in Egypt as part of what Althusser refers to as the “repressive state apparatus”. The repressive state apparatus according to him functions massively and predominantly by ideology. It operates by “interpolating individuals as subjects with specific ideology” (Althusser 1971, 158). By appropriating Althusser’s thesis to fit into her narrative, El Saadawi aims to reveal the defects entrenched in a male-oriented legal system, one supported by an oppressive judicial institution, rooted in religious dogma, which criminalizes women who defend their existence against brutal forces of a patriarchal world.

Contesting the Evils of Poverty and Patriarchy

The events of *Woman* reveal El Saadawi’s indebtedness to Western radical feminists. She sees the oppression of women by men as the most overarching reality in women’s history. Like Western socialist feminists, she believes that class inequality and male hegemony are latent in female oppression. Throughout Islamic history, men hold positions of power. On this basis, *Woman* is part of the author’s campaign to fight what critics call “the increasing feminization of poverty” (Hansen and Philipson 1990, 82). Even female labor was appropriated to serve masculine purposes. Unlike her brother, Firdaus was enslaved in the fields and the barn as a child. As an adult, aggressive agents from the male community repeatedly violated her body. Her uncle, her deformed husband, the parasitic opportunist, Ibrahim, who betrayed Firdaus in order to marry a woman from the upper capitalist class, the rich man who offered her ten pounds, and the affluent prince all exploited Firdaus’ femininity.

For El Saadawi, the interface between the two systems of patriarchy and capitalism is the root of women's oppression. In different essays and interviews, El Saadawi reminds her readers of the historical discrimination of women which leads to their invisibility in male-dominated societies. She notes the existence of "two interlocking and mutually dependent systems of oppression –patriarchy and capitalism" (Hennessy 2008, 57). As a socialist feminist, El Saadawi also sees class as a fundamental dimension of patriarchal hegemony. Thus, in *Woman*, aggressive males representing different sectors of the patriarchal society sexually exploited Firdaus.

Intuitively, El Saadawi underscores the subtle manner in which women are victims of male oppression and violence in a society shaped by inequitable class relations and reinforced by an androcentric gender system and by a government that has been unable or unwilling to address the needs of the poor. She strenuously reimagines gender roles. Her experiences as political prisoner and activist, as well as her work with poor urban women, have sparked the anger that drives her critique of the Egyptian society. She probes the ways in which ruling ideologies shape the lives of women and the ways in which women react to norms and social institutions. Further, her narrative techniques have allowed her to bring the details of the life history of Firdaus into the field of established signs and acceptable discourses.

Excluded from the surrounding male society and subjected to an endless cycle of suffering, violence and sexual abuse, even in marriage, Firdaus personifies the life of generations of poor women in Egypt. Firdaus has no voice to express as she is perpetually marginalized by a patriarchal machine, which annihilates women. As a subaltern, she is subordinated and disempowered and her identity is crushed by masculine hegemony. She is repeatedly silenced through poverty, denial, prostitution and a ruthless legal system that sentences her to death because she kills the criminal pimp who lives on her earnings, exploiting her sexually and financially. Ironically, Firdaus will go to the gallows because she murders the thug who strips her of dignity and humanity.

The Feminist Trajectories in *Woman at Point Zero*

In Western feminist canons, reading and writing are not neutral processes, but products of intricate conscious and unconscious social acts. Textual meaning is not confined to authorial intentions or to any hermeneutics initiated by critical communities or Arab male critics such as George Tarabishi who misreads *Woman*. In his critique of the novel, Tarabishi ignores the novel's patriarchal vortex and attacks what he calls "the author's negative portrayal of men." However, not all men in the text are evil. Fedwa Malti-Douglas notes, "A slight glimpse of light exists with the male prison doctor in the prologue of the novel. He does not believe Firdaus is guilty" (Malti-Douglas 1991, 52). Tarabishi also claims that the author visualizes the male-female natural / sexual relation "as the most hostile and belligerent relationship of all" (Tarabishi 1988, 17). Tarabishi ignores the entire social, economic, religious and political forces conspiring against Firdaus and concentrates on sexual and biological agendas. Forcing a Freudian reading on the text, Tarabishi focuses on what he calls the castrating effect Firdaus has inflicted on her male partners. Tarabishi builds his argument on the issue of⁷ castration on a statement uttered by Firdaus in her agony: "I offered to men only the outer surface in order to protect myself and my inner self against them" (1983, 112).

⁷ For an interesting study on the issue of castration see, Raisa Simola. "A Journey to Prison of two Young Women, Lemonada and Ferdaus". 2005. *Nordic Journal of African Studies* (14(2):162-174. The article discusses in details Tarabishi's critical account and El Saadawi's reply to his accusations in addition to other related issues pp.167-169.

Tarabishi degrades Firdaus, pretending that she is worse than any other common prostitute because “the prostitute becomes frigid in order to practice her profession; Firdaus has chosen to be a prostitute in order to practice frigidity, because, to use Karl Abraham’s terminology, it is ‘castrating’ (Tarabishi 1988, 23). Tarabishi also posits that Firdaus aims to strip “men of pride in their masculinity” (Tarabishi 1988, 24). He adds that her killing of the pimp is triggered by a state of neurosis or failure to adapt with reality. For Tarabishi, Firdaus chooses to be a prostitute and a murder just to “wage a war of the sexes” (1988, 33). Tarabishi argues that women can only win such war not by arming themselves with thorns and guns but by taming and humanizing the penis (1988, 11).

In her response, El Saadawi emphasizes that Firdaus did not plan to kill her pimp but she murdered him in self-defense after attacking her with a knife. Further, Firdaus never made the choice to become a prostitute. Instead, she struggles throughout the narrative to avoid falling into the prostitution trap. According to El Saadawi, Firdaus attempts to protect herself against her bitter reality by humanizing men’s penises, but she fails in transforming them from being a coercive weapon into human organs capable of love and compassion. She prefers to be sentenced to death rather than live as a sex object or a cheap commodity at men’s disposal.

The feminist text of *Woman* is a narrative of sexual abuse, rape, incest, prostitution and violence committed against women. The novel is a fiercely disturbing portrait of women in rural Egyptian communities besieged by ignorance, poverty and violence. Adrienne Rich argues that feminism brings “literary history and criticism back to life in both senses of the phrase” (Rich 1979, 33). In the novel, El Saadawi wants to destroy the sex-gender system—the basic source of women’s oppression—and build an alternative liberal paradigm. Discussing the multifarious ways of subaltern exploitation, El Saadawi showcases the gamut of subaltern experience via the character of Firdaus. El Saadawi also criticizes the privileged patriarchs who have always justified their exploitation of the female. Firdaus seeks to resist forces of exploitation and subvert dominant socio-religious modes and traditions in order to change the status quo. She pays her life as a price for this act of transgression aiming to trigger potential change.

Structurally, the novel reaches a feverish pitch from the opening chapter in which the reader is notified by Firdaus, that she will be hanged as punishment for murdering a man. The female narrator who is omnipresent in the narrative canvas has been ironically pushed to the peripheries of her society throughout her life. Through the text of her narrative, El Saadawi succeeds in giving a powerful voice to the voiceless narrator. The author recurrently interrupts the main narrative to comment on a culture obsessed with sexual abuse of the female subalterns. For aesthetic purposes, El Saadawi aims to sensationalize her subject matter, simultaneously focusing on sexual discourses and delaying the shocking and inevitable moment of murder. However, El Saadawi does not seek to propagate the narrowing pseudo-porn aspect of the novel involving rape and prostitution, which trade on the reader’s sexual fantasies. *Woman* is primarily a novel about women’s victimization and marginalization in a rotten patriarchal milieu.

Firdaus suffers from humiliation, rape, incest and violence, and the text reinforces her identity as an abused subaltern. In the Arab world, women are forbidden from seeking sexual pleasures or pursuing desire. They were subjected to the abusive economy of the harem, which reduced women to objects for male desire. In the world of the harem, women’s sexual organs equal their economic value. Further, under Islamic polygamy women were used for the profit and pleasure of a male-oriented community. In the rural society of Egypt, a woman is governed by the rules of an abusive system where she is defined by her sexual organ (used for male pleasure) and

her⁸ womb (for breeding children who will carry the name of the male oppressor). During the day, women work in the fields or in the barns without payment, and at night they are used as sexual machines.

Gayatri Spivak rightly points out that “the man retains legal property rights over the product of a woman’s body” (Spivak 1988, 80). This emphasis upon property and production intersects with the experience of Firdaus squarely at the crossroads of reproduction and desire. She is forced to marry an old man who suppresses her sexual and reproductive powers while struggling to possess her body. According to Spivak, a system of product / ownership obliterates the possibility of sexual pleasure. She relates her reluctance to underestimate what is uterine in favor of what is clitoral. For her, the “uterine social organization” is the arrangement of the world in terms of the reproduction of future generations, where the uterus is the chief agent and means of production. The “uterine social organization” in Spivak’s eyes, “should rather, be, ‘situated’ through the understanding that it has so far been established by excluding a clitoral social organization” (Spivak 1988, 150). Placing women’s sexual desire alongside their value as reproducers is a way of empowering women as subjects of pleasures rather than as objects for male satisfaction. Firdaus was stripped of both dichotomies and thus is disempowered. She is subject to the violence engendered by the atrocity of an over-aged husband who fails to sexualize with her leaving her sterile.

Being denied a sense of herself as a human being thwarts her sexuality and reinforces her powerlessness and frustration. Sexual abuse makes her believe that the relationship between men and women by the standards of her society is that of prostitute and client. Her history of abuse and humiliation circumvents her own desire and she becomes unable to feel anything sexually that drives her toward males. To resolve her legacy of abuse, Firdaus should recognize her potential for violent revenge and ruthless retaliation. She started to show tenderness toward women and brutality toward men. Violence and fear coalesce in the text culminating in the murder of the pimp, the protagonist’s oppressor, with a knife allegorically castrating him. Firdaus is never able to enjoy a moment of sexual intimacy throughout her life except as a child, but the final moment of murder witnessed an epiphany in which she reclaims her being from the narrative of abuse forced by society upon women. She re-evaluates her role as a victim by acknowledging her own power to hurt her abusers.

Conclusion

Toril Moi identifies feminist writing as that which “takes discernible anti-patriarchal and anti-sexist position” in an attempt to defend the female who was historically “marginalized”, repressed, silenced, “by the ruling social/linguistic order” (Moi 1986, 220). *Woman* is a novel, which entails feminine modes of representation, exploring issues of silencing and denial. The narrative gives voice to the subaltern female negotiating a subversive dynamics aiming to contest tradition, religion, authority and power. Unlike Spivak, who argues that the subaltern is not able to speak and it is the role of the intellectual elite to represent her, El Saadawi provides sufficient narrative space for her subaltern protagonist to speak and tell her own story. By the end of the narrative, she is located in a position to rebel the forces of oppression and exploitation. She is not powerless anymore contesting and confronting an entire tyrannical system.

⁸ I am alluding here to Simone de Beauvoir’s concept that women have been traditionally regarded as “womb.”

The female psychiatrist⁹ who appears in the beginning of the novel is semi-autobiographical figure serving as the voice of the author. The prison doctor tells the author that Firdaus was sentenced to death for killing a man. In prison as in real life, Firdaus' voice is muted and she prefers to remain silent: "She refuses to meet visitors, and won't speak to anyone". She stares vacantly into space for hours without uttering a word. In her silence, Firdaus refuses to answer any questions: "She emitted a short, sarcastic laugh and walked off. I heard her muttering to herself" (1983, 3). She even refuses to sign an appeal to the president of Egypt so that "her sentence may be commuted to imprisonment for life" (1983, 2). The silence in the beginning of the narrative epitomizes a permanent condition which women inherited since pre-medieval times. The process of silencing has been historically related to women as non-hegemonic subjects who were either denied the possibility of self-articulation or whose voices were purposefully ignored. Intrinsically, the act of silencing carries specific social, religious and gender implications.

In Arab communities, the voices of women were colonized and subdued for centuries to give way to phallogocentric modes of expression and domination. El Saadawi had several interviews with female prisoners sentenced to death in Egypt. As a psychiatrist engaging in research on women prisoners and detainees convicted of committing crimes, the author met with Firdaus, the female protagonist of the novel: "This is the story of a real woman. I met her in the Qanatir Prison¹⁰ a few years ago" (1983, 1). El Saadawi visits the women's prison and painstakingly convinces Firdaus to narrate her personal history, along with the story of her abused body. As a minor narrator, the female doctor interviews the protagonist and introduces the readers to the main persona in the novel. She succeeded in urging Firdaus, the traumatized subject and the humiliated subaltern, to make a confession. Entering the life of Firdaus means abandoning for the time of the interview the doctor's own life history and focusing on what is being related in the narrative. This process helps readers feel literally as if time has stopped in order to allow a new history to emerge. Here, Firdaus, the central narrator, introduces the events of her life through reminiscence of past events.

The willingness of the interviewer to experience the trauma of Firdaus, jolts the main narrator into a time of telling that is, ironically, preceded by a time of silence—not an absence but a pregnant form, reshaping itself in the fertile environment of imagining the unimaginable. The silence that precedes confession is followed by the readiness of the interviewer to enter the time of trauma experienced by the main narrator. This is the most decisive moment of encounter in which the self of the narrator and the interviewer would probably be lost in the act of facing the catastrophic consequences of living in a decadent society governed by a medieval morality and corrupt patriarchal ethics that despise women. The basic act of preserving the tale told of a body and spirit in pain and agony is crucial to the ability of the story of suffering and marginalization to be narrated in all its rawness and complexity, retaining its truthfulness and capacity to generate feelings in others.

Throughout history, Arab-Muslim communities, particularly in the Middle East, are notorious for their barbaric treatment of women, not only due to radical interpretations of the Islamic doctrine but also as a result of other cultural and tribal factors ingrained in local traditions. Some scholars mistakenly argue that Western feminism is grounded in liberal traditions and values different from Islamic ideologies sanctioning female persecution in the Middle East and establishing what is called Islamic feminism. In *Woman*, El Saadawi aims to subvert the values of

⁹ In the beginning of her medical career, El Saadawi was appointed as a psychiatrist serving in women's prisons in Egypt.

¹⁰ A well-known women's prison located outside Cairo.

a patriarchal society consolidated by religion and the voices of Islamic feminists who dismiss human aspects intrinsic to western feminist movements, justifying female oppression on the grounds of the existence of a supposed value conflict between East and West. This denial of equality between the sexes, and the semi-surrender to sexual hierarchies that rank one sex over the other due to biological or social consideration, is the core of El Saadawi's fight. Her feminist fiction aims to mobilize sex solidarity and eliminate prescribed gender roles.

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