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El Saadawi Does Not Orientalize the Other in *Woman at Point Zero*

By Luma Balaa¹

Abstract

El Saadawi's work in translation has been widely read in the West. On the one hand, she has been criticized for writing for the West, and many Arab critics argue that El Saadawi is famous in the West not because she "champions women's rights, but because she tells western readers what they want to hear" (Amireh, 1996). In addition, when *Woman at Point Zero* is taught in the Western classroom, some students, reviewers, and critics tend at times to read the novel as a window "onto a timeless Islam instead of as [a] literary [work] governed by certain conventions and produced within specific historical contexts" (Amireh, 2000). Recently, Drosihn (2014) has claimed that in *Woman at Point Zero* El Saadawi "is implicated in Western discourses seen in her reproduction of Orientalist stereotyping feeding into Western tendencies of simultaneously superiority and fear of the Middle East and especially Islam." Referring to Said's theory of Orientalism, I contend that El Saadawi does *not* orientalize the Other in her novel *Woman at Point Zero*. She occupies a space in-between in which she at times employs stereotypes but at other times challenges them. Also, using the theory of intersectionality, I argue that Arab women suffer from multiple jeopardy.

Keywords: *Woman at Point Zero*, Nawal El-Saadawi, oppression, orientalism, Otherness, Arab women

Introduction

On the one hand, Nawal El Saadawi has been criticized for writing for the West. Alia Mamdouh criticizes El Saadawi for turning creativity into "a lab to show sick samples which are deformed and which she represents as generalized social types" (Mamdouh, 1996, p. 12). On the other hand, Meneesha Govender (1996, p. 54) argues that "women in Egypt are seen by Western scholars to exist within an extremely oppressive patriarchal social system that places enormous store in the tenets and laws of Islam (a religion considered by the West to be the epitome of religious fundamentalism and cultural or social oppression)." When *Woman at Point Zero* is taught in the Western classroom, some students, reviewers, and critics tend at times to read this novel, and her other works, as "windows onto a timeless Islam instead of as literary works governed by certain conventions and produced within specific historical contexts" (Amireh, 2000, p. 240). This

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issue has been addressed previously in several articles, but now it has become both timely and highly critical to address because of the recent increase in Islamophobia in the West. Ever since 9/11 and the rise of ISIS terrorism worldwide, the West has shown fear of the Middle East and the Muslim “Other.” Islam and terrorism have become almost synonymous. Recently, Nora Drosihn (2014) has claimed that despite El Saadawi’s opposition to neocolonialism, in *Woman at Point Zero* El Saadawi herself “is implicated in Western discourses [as] seen in her reproduction of Orientalist stereotyping[,] feeding into Western tendencies of simultaneously superiority and fear of the Middle East and especially Islam” (p. 62). She argues that in *Woman at Point Zero* El Saadawi orientalizes the Other, since the novella reflects neo-colonial Western hegemony and Eurocentric philosophy by mainly portraying the East in a way that “generates a pervasive fear of Islam due to its confusion with fundamentalist terrorism” (p. 42). Referring to Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism, I contend that El Saadawi neither orientalizes the Other nor perpetuates stereotyping of Arabs in her novel *Woman at Point Zero*. I agree that El Saadawi does employ stereotyping to a certain extent, but she is in fact occupying a space in between, where at times she employs stereotypes but at other times challenges them. Also, using the theory of intersectionality I argue that Arab women suffer from multiple jeopardy.

Woman at Point Zero (2007) is a novella that tells the story of a woman named Firdaus. The novel is organized into three sections: an introduction, main narrative, and an epilogue. In the introduction, El Saadawi tells us how she was trying to meet Firdaus in order to find out what her story was about. In the main narrative, Firdaus’s story is narrated by El Saadawi. Firdaus is a prisoner at the Qanatir Prison in Egypt in 1977 and has been sentenced to death because she killed her pimp. Firdaus is the daughter of a peasant who lives in a village. Her father oppresses her and beats her mother up. She is made to believe that a woman is inferior to a man. She used to play “bride and groom” with a boy called Mohammadain when she was in the fields. This was the first time she experienced sexual pleasure, which she remembers fondly and refers to subtly when she falls in love. She gets circumcised and is banned from going to the fields again. After Firdaus’s parents die, she migrates to the city where her uncle takes care of her, but he sexually molests her and eventually forces her to marry a man forty years her senior. Then, when her husband beats her, she runs away, is raped, and then seeks refuge at her uncle’s house. Her uncle returns her back to her husband, saying that all husbands beat their wives. When her husband injures her for a second time, she runs away once more and is pushed into prostitution. She tries to leave this profession by going to work in private industry, where she falls in love with a colleague at the company, but he betrays her and marries the chairman’s daughter. Firdaus relapses back into prostitution because of the poor wages she received and the lack of respect she experienced. Her pimp abuses her and takes all of her money. She eventually kills him out of self-defense because he threatens to kill her and she stabs him before he is able to kill her. Later, the prison doctor suggests that she write a petition to reduce her sentence to imprisonment rather than the death penalty. However, she refuses to sign it, preferring to die than live imprisoned. In the epilogue, El Saadawi describes her feelings after she has heard Firdaus’s story.

Edward Said’s Orientalism

Said’s theory of Orientalism (1978) is an invaluable one that helps to recognize how some Western texts essentialize the East. Said argues that Orientalists intentionally misrepresent the East as the “Other,” and as barbaric, irrational, fallen, and inferior in order to justify colonization and political intervention. This representation is expressed in different ways, such as through art,

literature, political theory, philosophy, and other rhetoric (1978, pp. 1-2). This theory might be applicable to how some Westerners write about the East in a negative manner or how some readers in the West read texts produced in the Arab world. As Therese Saliba argues, the “Western tendency to read third world women’s experience exclusively in terms of their victimization is thwarted” (1995, p. 142). Amireh (1996, p. 3) contends that the reason for the “the West’s interest in Arab women is part of its interest in and hostility to Islam”. She explains that this is part of the colonialist vision that labels Arab women as “victims to be rescued from Muslim male violence” (p. 3). She comments that Westerners tend to develop a fixation on stereotypical images such as “the veil, the harem, excision, and polygamy” (p. 3). Moreover, some readers tend to view Arabic literature as “an uncomplicated ‘window’ into the lives of women in the region—of course often disregarding how radically these experiences vary according to factors such as class, ethnicity and religion” (Gebrial, 2014, p. 1).

Said claims that at times, the “modern Orient ... [participates] in its own Orientalizing” (Said, 1978, p. 325). Bromley comments that “Said’s claim that the Orient has been constructed by the West and that it is now starting to participate in its own orientalizing can direct attention away from an analysis of the social and material reality of Middle East societies” (Bromely, 1994, p. 12). El Saadawi, through *Woman at Point Zero*, is neither misrepresenting the East nor participating in its own orientalizing. The novel “depicts ‘experience’ as already always bound up with variable interpretations, countering any notion that ‘women of color,’ by virtue of their race and sex, embody an authentic experience of alterity” (Weatherston, 1997, p. 18). I further refute the proposition that El Saadawi’s use of stereotypes in *Woman at Point Zero* feeds into fear of the Middle East or Islam. Just because the novel sheds light on how women are oppressed in Egypt, this does not mean that she is feeding into this fear of the “Other.” Critics should not generalize, because the Middle East is huge and consists of many different countries with various religions, such as Islam, Christianity, and others.

El Saadawi is just pointing to the vices and corruption in her society, which is what most authors do. El Saadawi notes that she writes because she feels pain and suffering and thus wants to change the system (Hunt & Longinotto, 1990). El Saadawi not only writes novels and articles with the aim of raising awareness of the patriarchal oppression; she also takes part in community service. For example, in *Hidden Faces* she distributes food to the poor and gives goats to young illiterate girls to help them become economically independent (Hunt & Longinotto, 1990). They become goat herders and are able to support themselves by selling goat meat and milk. Also, El Saadawi works as a psychiatrist to help young women with their psychological problems.

Barbara Harlow comments that “Firdaus’s story is the history of an Egyptian peasant girl victimized by the conservative indigenous traditions of her country and exploited by the post-colonial corruption which characterized Egyptian society and government, particularly under Anwar Sadat” (1987, p. 137). El Saadawi is against neo-Orientalism and Western intervention (El Saadawi, 2001, p. 1). The women in this novel were colonized by the British, and although Egypt gained its independence during the time the novel was set, colonization affected the lives of both postcolonial women and men. El Saadawi attacks imperialism and argues that with “capitalism, the system reaches its fiercest aspects of exploitation and oppression, particularly when heightened by imperialism on the world level, with its economic global domination” (Boullata, 1990, pp. 128-129).

Moreover, El Saadawi writes in Arabic. *Woman at Point Zero* was first written in Arabic in 1975, and was later translated into English and other languages. Therefore, she cannot be accused of writing for the West, at least when she first wrote this novel. El Saadawi is not

presenting the East as uncivilized so that the West can intervene. Besides, when social problems are highlighted in the Middle East, one should not automatically assume that the message is for the West to interfere and save the East, such as in “white men are saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak, 1988, p. 287).

Art or literature should not be taken literally to represent the authenticity of what happens in reality. After all, the author herself notes that although this story is based on a true story, it includes some fictional elements (Badran & Cooke, 1990, p. 402). Literature is an imitation of life: it is supposed to make the reader reflect upon the themes tackled. The text is not didactic but simply a window-opener. As Weatherston (1997) comments in reference to the novel *Woman at Point Zero*, for “a reader to homogenize these collective experiences [of women in this novel] into an unchanging, generic ‘suffering’ that ignores the differences among women in that society is to once again seek an authentic (and authenticating) representation of oppression” (p. 18). This novel is mainly about an Egyptian farmer, but other women from different classes are represented. Furthermore, “the complexity of the novel’s portrayal of its female characters, and of the differences as well as the similarities between them, subverts such a homogenization” (p. 18). This story is symbolic of what is happening in the Arab world, and the novel condenses all types of oppression into one character, that of Firdaus. Some other women are oppressed in similar ways, such as through incest, rape, and hunger, but not necessarily to the same degree. Saddik Gohar comments that “the story of Firdaus is a replica of contemporary Arab women struggling against male hegemony, supremacy and stagnant religious heritage” (2016, p. 178). At the same time, this does not mean that all Arab women are oppressed in exactly the same way. El Saadawi may have exaggerated aspects of her story for rhetorical purposes and for dramatic effect so as to get her message across in the hope that change would occur. Also, El Saadawi is aware of the different ways in which women of different classes are oppressed, so she is not presenting a monolithic picture.

El Saadawi is affected by Western discourses, such as socialist feminism, where she views class as an essential dimension of patriarchal hegemony. As Dalia Gebrial rightly comments, “what often turns into an attempt to ‘explain’ through its fiction, an ‘Othered’ culture, which has been forced into the Western purview for political reasons, has dramatically limited the scope of these texts” (2014, p. 1). Perhaps watching the documentary *Hidden Faces* (Hunt & Longinotto, 1990), a documentary which was originally meant to focus on Nawal El Saadawi and ended up only including a brief interview with her, helps to shed light on women’s lives in Egypt in certain parts of the country. For instance, it reveals the lives of two women from different social classes in Menya district: the interviewer, Saffa Fathhay, has the chance to study at university and live in Paris, while Saida, the helper at home, is not allowed to learn how to read and write and has been working ever since she was four years old. She is also beaten up by Mustafa, Fathay’s brother, who is very authoritative and patriarchal (Hunt & Longinotto, 1990). Although this documentary is outdated and an up-to-date version is required, it illustrates the different classes and social divisions in Egypt.

Multiple Jeopardy and Simultaneity

Intersectionality helps the reader contextualize El Saadawi’s text and better understand how women are oppressed. As a paradigm it is an approach founded by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the 1980s. Drawing on Collins’s paradigm of intersectionality (2000), in this paper I show that the text exposes multiple interconnected forces composed of intersectional multiple hierarchal systems of

discrimination that oppress women. El Saadawi presents how Arab women are oppressed by multiple forces, and the relationship between these forces of oppression is multiplicative. Intersectionality challenges the claim that all Arab women are oppressed in the same way. In this novel, four main female characters are presented: Firdaus, El Saadawi, Sharifa, and Firdaus's step-aunt. Although they all live in the same country, gender stratification affects them differently. Intersectionality "refutes the compartmentalization and hierarchization of the great axes of social differentiation through categories of gender/sex, class, race, ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation" (Bilge, 2010, p. 58).

The matrix of domination in this novel is organized into four interrelated domains of power that dominate women: the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal. These four domains play a large role in oppressing the female protagonists. The structural domain organizes oppression and the disciplinary domain controls it. The structural domain encompasses how social institutions are systematized to perpetuate females' subservience. The hegemonic domain validates this oppression and deals "with ideology, culture, and consciousness" (Collins, 2000, p. 302). The interpersonal domain tells us how people treat each other on a daily basis. Collins explains that these "practices [of how people treat each other] are systematic, recurrent, and so familiar that they often go unnoticed" (p. 307). Dominant groups generate "commonsense" ideologies to allow them to maintain power. These social institutions are intertwined and depend on manifold forms of segregation to create social injustice.

All four domains of power have their impact, and it is difficult to dissect them because of their interconnected nature. For the purpose of this study, I classify them into different sub-domains. The structural domain is manifested mainly in politics, patriarchy, capitalism, and class. The hegemonic domain can be portrayed through cultural hegemony, such as that of religion, gender, and sexuality. The disciplinary domain employs mainly surveillance to control the oppression. Last but not least, the interpersonal domain is exemplified through how women view themselves and how they treat other women.

The Structural Domain

Firdaus is oppressed by the political regimes headed by Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar Sadat. Lack of freedom and democracy are two important factors. Gamal Abdel Nasser was the president of Egypt from 1952 until his death in 1969, and *Woman at Point Zero* was first published when Anwar Sadat became president, so Firdaus might have been criticizing both regimes, that of Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar Sadat. Historically speaking, in 1967 Egypt was stripped of the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula. This was known as the "Six-Day War" and ended with Egypt being defeated by Israel. At the end of Nasserist rule, the socialist state weakened. Therefore, Firdaus might have been criticizing Nasser's regime and his way of managing the war. Furthermore, she tells us about the corruption of the rulers. She describes how her father brought her up to believe that the "love of the ruler and love of Allah were one and indivisible" (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 11): the ruler is viewed as a god. Firdaus used to spot pictures of Arab rulers in newspapers in which they are attending Friday prayers, pretending to show humility, and "trying to deceive Allah in the same way he deceived the people" (p. 27). When Firdaus grows up, she attacks the oppressive political regime and describes the poverty, oppression, and inequality whereby many women and men were exploited and abused. She speaks of the greed of rulers and their "never-ending appetite for money, sex and unlimited power" (pp. 26-27).

Furthermore, in *Woman at Point Zero* structural laws are discriminatory against women. The structural powers manifested in the laws of a country, communities, families, and other institutions play an enormous role in dictating the communities' rules. In *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1980b), El Saadawi "argues that the value system that subjugates women to men forms part of the basic structures of patriarchal society and is a function of the economic system of that society. A power structure is put in place to maintain and defend this system through political and social institutions, which reinforce it by the laws and sanctions associated with them" (Boullata, 1990, pp. 128–129). The protagonist is harassed and the law does not protect her; for instance, criminal law does not protect Firdaus when she is raped or when she is forced to marry someone she does not love. Firdaus is "victimized by a legal system grounded in a merciless patriarchal society, which underestimated women" (Gohar, 2016, p. 176). There are no laws against rape, marital rape, or domestic violence. Also, rather than protecting her when she kills the pimp in self-defense, the law instead convicts her. So the patriarchal legal system criminalizes women who try to defend their rights.

Patriarchy and capitalism simultaneously join forces to oppress Firdaus from top to bottom. She clearly lives in a patriarchal society where men dominate women, and both agree to this in unison through various fields such as family, marriage, religion, culture, politics, economics, and others. Firdaus is subjected to the power her boss wields over her just as workers are expected to accept the economic dominance of capitalists and to conform to their rules of achieving economic success (Landry, 2007, p. 7). She is a farmer who had to work on the farm, to carry heavy jugs of water and to clean out the animals (2007, p. 12). When working in a company, Firdaus comments that it has two doors: one for higher-level staff and another for lesser employees. Employees are treated differently and different rules apply to each category. For example the higher-ups are able to come and go as they please whereas the ordinary employees are monitored. Female employees are always afraid of losing their jobs and so they make concessions—to the extent that she thinks they are more afraid of losing their jobs than a prostitute is of losing her life (p. 82).

Men can use their position as capitalists to marginalize women (Landry, 2007, p. 7). The fact that women are paid less than men, or not given the chance to work at all, illustrates men's position as capitalists who oppress women. Firdaus finds it hard to find employment and experiences firsthand how dependent women are upon men. It is difficult for women to get money, as if "money was a shameful thing, ... an object of sin which was forbidden to [her] and yet permissible for others, as though it had been made legitimate only for them" (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 73). Women are assigned domestic tasks, such as when Firdaus is asked to do the housework at her uncle's house for free, or in return for free food and accommodation. Also, men do not allow women to go to university and thereby have a chance at gaining a good salary. Even when Firdaus was a child, "female labor was appropriated to serve masculine purposes. Unlike her brother, Firdaus was enslaved in the fields and the barn as a child" (Gohar, 2016, p. 182). When she marries the old man, she works as a housewife while he monitors her. She views her marriage to this man as being like prostitution, but of the lowest form (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 99).

Men conspire among themselves to dominate women. Firdaus explains that it is not just her pimp who has power but also the powerful figures he collaborates with from other professions. For example, the pimp conspires with lawyers to defend him and release locked-up prostitutes, with doctors to perform abortions on pregnant prostitutes, and with policemen to set him free or spare him from raids. Therefore, all forces combine to oppress Firdaus. This shows the intersectionality of the law, the medical institutions, and patriarchy to oppress women. The ruler

and policemen force her to accept an invitation from a powerful client. If she refuses, they threaten her with prison.

Class oppression is linked to patriarchy and capitalism; nevertheless, it can act as a form of oppression for some women but a privilege for others, which is why readers should not essentialize Arab women. Landry argues that class “position determines one’s economic resources, which in turn determines one’s living standard” (Landry, 2007, p. 6). Firdaus comes from the working class and is partly oppressed by that. Even though she tries to raise her social class by obtaining a secondary school certificate and becoming a high-class prostitute, she admits that although her make-up, clothes, and hair give her the “upper class” look on the outside, deep down she is still lower class. Also, status determines how other people view her. She does not earn enough money when she works in an office, so she has to live in a poor area where she has to wait in line to use the lavatories. Her step-aunt views her as a servant. Firdaus is more oppressed than her uncle’s wife who comes from a high class. As a consequence, her uncle does not beat her step-aunt; he speaks gently to her, he listens to her, and at times she seems to have power over him.

The psychiatrist character, based on El Saadawi, notes her class and wonders if Firdaus is a better person than she is. El Saadawi, who is a medical doctor and of a higher class than Firdaus, can relate to her, but no matter how much the author tries, she is more privileged than Firdaus. Firdaus refuses to meet El Saadawi after several visits. El Saadawi says “[c]ompared to her, I was nothing but a small insect upon the land amidst millions of other insects” (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 3). Also, when Firdaus finally agrees to see her, she makes her feel inferior. She tells her “[let] me speak. Do not interrupt me. I have no time to listen to you” (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 9). When the policemen take Firdaus to be executed, El Saadawi feels ashamed of herself and of her life, fears and lies (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 114). She is convinced that Firdaus is better than her because she has the courage to say what is on her mind, to stand up for her rights and to face execution.

In order to make sure that the rules of the structural patriarchal powers are followed, the disciplinary domain manages power relations by employing various techniques, such as surveillance. Foucault (1977, p. 187) argues that disciplinary power is exercised “through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility.” In a patriarchal society, women and men tend to conform to these subject positions, and if they do not, they are judged according to these norms. The patriarchal/male gaze is dominant everywhere in the novel and haunts Firdaus throughout her life. Men in her society seem to interfere in every move she makes and try to judge her. She uses the eye motif to symbolize the theme of surveillance. She narrates, “Ever since I was born those two eyes had always been there, wide open, staring, unflinching, following every morsel of food on my plate” (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 71). Here, her father made sure that she was conforming to his patriarchal wishes and demands. Even her mother watches her and monitors her actions. Her uncle watches every path she takes; her husband watches every bite she eats and dominates all of her behavior at home, beating her if she wastes soap or food; her customers judge her and call her “unrespectable” because she is a prostitute. When she runs away from home, all men stare at her, objectify her and some rape her. She tells the reader that she sees these eyes following her in the street. She comments that “[she] was not confronted with a hand holding a knife or a razor, but only with two eyes, nothing but two eyes (p. 44). The male gaze and the eyes also symbolize how men believe they possess women. Firdaus is also made to feel that she is a nobody just because she is a woman. “Each minute a thousand eyes passed in front of me, but for them I remained non-existent” (p. 43). When a man rapes her she only sees his two eyes and his male gaze (p. 43-44). Finally, her pimp watches her,

chases her, and wants to control her; he wants to take all her money because of the patriarchal assumption that a woman cannot survive without a man.

The Hegemonic Domain

Not all concepts of intersection theory are at the same level as illustrated above; some are at the macro-level, such as the structural, while others are at the micro-level. Patriarchy and capitalism are not just systems of relationships; they are also systems of values and beliefs (Landry, 2007, pp. 6-7). The ruling classes manipulate their societies politically through cultural hegemony. The hegemonic domain of power rationalizes practices in the other domains and legitimates oppression; it deals with ideology, culture, and consciousness. The hegemonic domain can be illustrated through religion, gender, and sexuality.

Drosihn contends that “despite only being discussed marginally in *Woman at Point Zero*, the novel transmits distrust in religion shaped by patriarchal interests” (2014, p. 26). It is not Islam that oppresses women but the hypocritical application, and misinterpretation, of religion. Islam “has an almost unlimited number of manifestations, which appear differently according to correspondent historical, political, economic and cultural contexts” (Gebrial, 2014, p. 40). Intersectionality also reveals that it is not just hypocritical Islam and patriarchy that are the players: all four domains of power intersect in oppressing Firdaus. The novel is an attack on the whole of society—not on Islam. El Saadawi rightly disagrees with those Westerners who try to explain the problems of Arab women in relation to “the attitudes, values and nature of Islam” (El Saadawi, 1980b, p. 4). Many of the interpretations of religion are sexist and based on patriarchal misinterpretations made by men in power. “The use of Islamic discourse is so effective in manipulating the masses because it combines religion and traditions; power structures and patriarchy take advantage of this melange in order to oppress women” (Balaa, 2013, p. 190). Indeed, Islam “plays a considerable role in the narrative of *Woman [at Point Zero]*, punctuated by references to the Imam of the mosque, the father of Firdaus, her uncle and the village folks hypnotized by fake religious sermons” (Gohar, 2016, p. 177). It is true that the text is set against an Islamic background but it is the abuse, or misinterpretation, of religion, hypocrisy, and the confusion between religion, traditions, and culture that oppress women. In the Arab world, religion is utilized as an “instrument in the hands of economic and political forces, as an institution by those who rule to keep down those who are ruled” (El Saadawi, 1980b, pp. 3-4).

In order to explain how the hegemonic domains are oppressing these women, I will refer to Barthes’s theory of mythologies and Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony. These “theories explain the links between the power of misinterpreted religion and myths in creating hegemony, poverty, a culture of deceit, and the misrepresentations, helplessness, and acceptance of contradictory situations” (Balaa, 2013, p. 193). Barthes’s theory of mythology can shed light on how the ruling class and its cohorts “perpetuate these myths about Islam and on why these myths are so powerful” (p. 193). Barthes (1972) contends that myths imply distortion. The myth falsifies the truth and “is an ideological apparatus that attempts to portray reality in a certain manner and according to certain political ideology” (Balaa, 2013, p. 193). Barthes considers myths as being constructed by politicians because they are the product of a particular structural power at a specific time and place. However, to explain why this myth about Islam is powerful, it should be noted that it is camouflaged as religion and is presented as objective and natural.

Gramsci’s theory (1971) of cultural hegemony can be applied to this text to examine the cultures that such patriarchal systems produce. Cultural hegemony affects how society views

Firdaus and how she views herself. “The significance of the hegemonic domain of power lies in its ability to shape consciousness via the manipulation of ideas, images, symbols, and ideologies” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 285). Gramsci argues that capitalism is not just exploiting the people economically but mentally, perpetuating ideologies and values constructed by the ruling class, which might include religion and traditions. “A power structure is put in place to maintain and defend this system through political and social institutions, which reinforce it by the laws and sanctions associated with them” (Boullata, 1990, pp. 128-129). The government can dictate the rules and it may try to enforce them, but for cultural hegemony to effectively work the public has to consent (Balaa, 2013, p. 195).

Firdaus points to the hypocrisy in religion and how some religious leaders pretend to show humility, deceiving the public through their dressed-up speeches. Though some claim to be religious in the text, many are unreligious, such as Bayoumi and her pimp. El Saadawi presents some Muslim men as hypocrites, such as Firdaus’s uncle, who sexually molests his niece, and Firdaus’s father displays hypocrisy because he pretends to be pious and yet steals and cheats. Firdaus’s husband is presented as a sheikh who abuses his wife sexually, physically, and psychologically. These men are misinterpreting Islam and abusing it to control the women in their family. The uncle marries off his niece so as to obtain her dowry to pay off his debts and to avoid supporting her financially. Firdaus was forced to marry her husband, but in Islam this is not allowed because both parties should consent. Her husband is as old as her grandfather and cannot bear children. He beats her because she leaves morsels of food on her plate or because she “drop[s] the packet of soap powder and spill[s] a few grains on the floor.” Then he “got into the habit of beating [her] whether he had a reason for it or not” (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 46). When Firdaus seeks out her uncle’s house as a shelter from her abusive husband, her uncle tells her that “all husbands beat their wives” (p. 46). Firdaus says to herself, “I said my uncle was a respected Sheikh, well versed in the teachings of religion, and he, therefore, could not possibly be in the habit of beating his wife” (p. 44). She then realizes that her uncle employs double standards because she has never seen him beat his wife. Therefore, Firdaus is convinced that Islam does not support this kind of behavior. She is taken back to her husband by her uncle. However, the husband one day beats her so much that blood comes out of her nose and ears. Islam teaches respect between a husband and wife and the novel does not show this between Firdaus and her husband.

Firdaus suffers physically, emotionally, and psychologically as a result of hegemonic patriarchal power that controls gender, religion, and sexuality. As Firdaus is being brought up in her parents’ house, her uncle’s house, or at school, she is made to feel that she is inferior to boys and worthless. Hegemonic power is illustrated by the perpetuation of the idea that a woman’s body is a commodity. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that the body is the principal site of power in our modern society, which explains how women are socially controlled through their bodies and sexualities. Foucault remarks that sexuality is “completely constructed in culture according to the political aims of the society’s dominant class” (as cited in De Lauretis, 1987, p. 12). Foucault does not focus on sources of societal power, such as the economy or the state, but rather examines micro-level power relations and the “modern technologies of power” (1978, pp. 151-52). He remarks that technologies “made sex not only a secular concern but a concern of the state as well: to be more exact, sex became a matter that required the social body as a whole, and virtually all of its individuals, to place themselves under surveillance” (Foucault, 1980, p. 116). In El Saadawi’s novel, sex is related to culture but is not secular as Foucault suggests—though it is most definitely a concern of patriarchal capitalist structural powers. Using Foucauldian principles, Firdaus’s body can be understood as being owned

and dominated through sexual control; women experience sexual fear and lack sexual rights, sexual freedom, or sexual pleasure.

The hegemonic forces of power through misinterpreted religion and cultural hegemony attempt to justify this oppression and rationalize circumcision, forced marriages, arranged marriages to older men, and even rape—by putting the blame on the victim for running away or asking for it. Firdaus discovers that the patriarchal rules are unfairly stacked against women, and that women do not have the same legal rights as men. This is sanctified by misinterpreted Islamic rules which dictate that a woman should obey what her father, brother, or husband order her to do, even if it is wrong, illogical, or immoral.

The ruling class perpetuate their own ideologies through the law, traditions, and religion simultaneously. At Friday prayer the Imam tells the people to obey the ruler (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 11). He praises the ruler so that he can keep his daily job. The men attending Friday prayer, including her father, are somewhat brainwashed and continually apply what the Imam has said without really analyzing or criticizing it.

I could see them walking through the narrow winding lanes, nodding their heads in admiration, and in approval of everything his Holiness the Imam had said. I would watch them as they continued to nod their heads, rub their hands, one against the other, wipe their brows while all the time invoking Allah's name, calling upon his blessings, repeating His holy words in a guttural, subdued tone, muttering and whispering without a moment's respite. (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 11).

Her father cheats by selling a poisoned buffalo before it dies and he steals from the fields once the crop is ripe. The farmers and the Imam are brainwashed and alienated from the reality of the world around them, absorbing the oppressor's patriarchal ideologies through a process by which "a complete hegemony of an oppressive system is achieved only when the victims, through a process of cultural and religious socialization, become alienated. They learn to deny their existential being and imbibe the views of their oppressors" (Shihada, 2007, pp. 171-172).

Double standards are employed when it comes to sexuality: men are allowed to experience sexual pleasure freely, but women are not. Firdaus is not supposed to have sex outside marriage, but men are not punished if they rape her. Firdaus is sexually abused, sexually harassed, and employed in sexual slavery. Firdaus's body is abused and, as Fedwa Malti-Douglas (1995, p. 3) argues, "[T]he body in the Saadawian literary corpus is more than a source of conflict. It is intimately tied to a discourse of gender and sexual definition," and she asks, "[W]hat is sexual slavery if not the exploitation of woman's body? Indeed, one of the most important leitmotifs of *Woman at Point Zero* is woman's body. Who owns it? Who controls it? Does Firdaus have a right to it?" (p. 52) A patriarchal society refuses to see Firdaus as anything but a sex object, "a body that is meant to exist for the sole pleasure of men" (Saiti & Salti, 1994, p. 154). Firdaus is sexually raped several times. When Firdaus is at work at the company, she describes incidents of sexual harassment. Furthermore, Bayoumi, her pimp, exploits her sexually and allows other men to sleep with her in exchange for money.

Firdaus is denied her right to sexual pleasure. Evelyn Accad comments that "sexuality seems to have a revolutionary potential so strong that many political women and men are afraid of it" (2005, p. 3). The patriarchal society controls women's bodies by depriving them of sex and by making women fear their sexual bodies. Because of being circumcised, Firdaus greatly suffers all her life and cannot feel any sexual pleasure. The physical and psychological pain generated by

circumcision subtly and persistently haunts Firdaus throughout her life. This is portrayed in how she still remembers this trauma so well that she resorts to narrating it before she dies. She tells El Saadawi that her mother “brought a woman who was carrying a small knife or maybe a razor blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from between [her] thighs” (p. 12). As a result, she cried all night. This surgery is not hygienic and does not involve anesthesia. Circumcision is believed to be a religious practice, but it is not part of Islam despite having been conflated with it for years. In the documentary *Hidden Faces* (Hunt & Longinotto, 1990), most of the interviewer’s cousins were circumcised. The majority know that it is not a religious practice and some view it as a cleansing mechanism. Others are aware that it is done as a cultural or societal practice to decrease women’s sexual needs and pleasure. In *Women at Point Zero*, Firdaus’s mother “participated in the performance of the clitoridectomy when she was a young girl. This operation leads in the novel to a nostalgic sense of lost desire, to an absent sense of corporal pleasure” (Malti-Douglas, 1995, p. 63). Here, the mother is perpetuating oppressive patriarchal ideologies. As a consequence, only men experience pleasure during sexual activity, and thus gain more power over women.

Firdaus also suffers from unrequited love. When at school she is oppressed by heterosexism. Firdaus displays lesbian tendencies, but Egyptian law and society are against homosexuality; this shows how the structural and hegemonic domains intersect and combine to oppress women. She falls in love with her teacher, Iqbal, but does not dare come out of the closet. Later in life, she is deprived of loving the man she loves. Ibrahim, a fellow employee, fools Firdaus by telling her that he loves her. She realizes that he does not really love her but is only using her body. He then marries the manager’s daughter because he is after wealth and class status. Firdaus’s experiences with Iqbal and Ibrahim are slightly similar. The two experiences and characters mirror each other in some ways, such as when she describes meeting with them and they both try to calm her down because she had been crying. She even says at a certain point: “I could no longer distinguish between the faces of ... Iqbal and Ibrahim” (p. 87). Even the language used to describe her feelings is similar; for example, in both cases when they abandon her, she asks whether they had forgotten how they felt towards her (El Saadawi, 1983, p. 31, p. 86). Firdaus feels extreme pain and decides to return to prostitution because she thinks that “a successful prostitute was better than a misled saint” (El Saadawi, 1983, p. 82). Nonetheless, she does not take revenge on Ibrahim personally; instead, she later kills her pimp, who is symbolic of patriarchal oppression.

The Interpersonal Domain and Solidarity

How women view themselves and other women is the major key to change. Firdaus initially did not realize that she was oppressed and viewed herself as lacking agency, but throughout the novel her character develops and her view of herself is altered, thus empowering her. One way of rebelling against the oppressive interpersonal domain, according to Collins (2000), is to have a voice and a “safe space” (p. 100). Collins highlights the importance of the process of self-definition that becomes possible within safe spaces because this process allows the subject to oppose being defined by others. Firdaus is against being objectified as “the Other.” She realizes that she is oppressed. Through self-definition, women can resist the dominant ideology transmitted by patriarchal society. I draw on what Teresa De Lauretis (1987) calls the “space-off,” which is “a movement from the space represented by/in a representation, by/in a discourse, by/in a sex-gender system, to the space not represented yet implied (unseen) in them” (p. 26). These spaces are “safe” because the subjects can freely express their voices without the interference of the hegemonic ideology. Firdaus starts to see herself differently from the way society views her when she first

sees herself in the mirror (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 19). Later on in the novel, Firdaus refuses to be defined by others. The moment of epiphany comes when she realizes that the person she loves is a hypocrite and is after his personal interests, not love or nationalism. It is only when she sees herself differently that she is able to break the power of the male gaze. She “[tears] off the veil, the last, remaining veil from before my eyes” (p. 107).

Women in this novel play a large role in perpetuating patriarchy and oppressing one another. Women try to keep other females in their place to preserve patriarchy. This is a reinforcement of Fanon’s theory regarding the relationship between natives and colonizers. “Just as the colonized is claimed to be the creation of the colonizer, the woman in the patriarchal family is deemed to be essentially a construct of the man. The woman comes to internalize the gender stereotypes of the man as much as the colonized ‘native’ interiorizes the gender stereotypes of the colonizer” (Mazrui & Abala, 1997, p. 31). Firdaus is oppressed by her mother, Sharifa (the female pimp), and her uncle’s wife. Her mother is either unsupportive or absent. Moreover, women show no powerful solidarity within the novel, with the exception of Firdaus’s teacher and, to a certain extent, El Saadawi, the author of *Woman at Point Zero*. Bell Hooks claims that solidarity between women can be political, and the basis or model of this sisterhood should not be based on “shared victimization” or on “common oppression” (1986, p. 128). In contrast, its basis should be on “shared strengths and resources” (p. 128); that is, “to experience solidarity, we must have a community of interests, shared beliefs and goals around which to unite to build Sisterhood” (p. 138). Firdaus lacks solidarity with other women and experiences only minor bonding relationships. For example, she has a short-term bonding with her school teacher. As for Sharifa’s relationship with Firdaus, although she teaches her how to cope with oppression and patriarchy, she unquestionably oppresses her. Solidarity is absent because of jealousy, the adoption of patriarchal ideologies, and classism. Sharifa is jealous of Firdaus because of the competition she poses.

Despite their class differences, it cannot be denied that there is solidarity between the author and Firdaus. El Saadawi can identify with some of her problems, such as circumcision and patriarchy. The oppressed has the courage to tell her story and die for her cause and El Saadawi is audacious in writing her story. Also, they both have the same goal, which is to fight patriarchy and injustice. Govender comments that the author is finally “able to identify herself and other women in Firdaus” (1996, p. 57). Nevertheless, their bonding does not eliminate sexist oppression—perhaps because it comes too late in Firdaus’s life.

Challenging Stereotypes and Rebellion

El Saadawi is occupying a space in-between where even though she might be employing stereotypes, she challenges them. The common stereotype of the Arab woman in Orientalist work is that she is a victim, voiceless, and without agency. Edward Said comments that nineteenth-century Orientalist authors dwelled on the exotic, erotic sexuality of the Oriental woman (1979, p. 187). He comments on Flaubert’s description of Kuchuk Hanem, the latter’s female lover, as a “disturbing symbol of fecundity, peculiarly Oriental in her luxuriant and seemingly unbounded sexuality” (p. 187). Kuchuk Hanem was a local exotic dancer Flaubert met during his travels to Egypt. Women possess “primitive” beauty because they are close to nature. Also, in patriarchal Arabic literature women tend to be either “scared, pure mothers and frigid, chaste, respectable wives” or “the prostitute and the mistress, women who are warm, pulsating, seductive, but despised” (El Saadawi, 1980a, p. 166). El Saadawi breaks these stereotypes by presenting a new vision of a female prostitute: “She takes up the motif of the Cairo prostitute but gives it a new and

innovative reading that places self-determination and self-identity with the woman and not a man” (Govender, 1996, p. 58). Firdaus is presented as neither exotic nor erotic.

Firdaus is not presented as a voiceless victim but as a central protagonist who speaks out about her story. El Saadawi challenges stereotypical Oriental discourse by her voicing of the subaltern. Historically in the patriarchal Arab male tradition, women were silenced and El Saadawi, through Firdaus’s tale, “interrogates the narratives of major Arab authors who marginalized women in their fictional roles” (Gohar, 2016, p. 174). El Saadawi, in an interview about writing *Woman at Point Zero*, says that she did not speak for Firdaus: “I spoke to her and she spoke to me. I didn’t speak about her” (Hitchcock, 1993, p. 176). Barbara Harlow comments that when Firdaus agrees to tell her story, she “allow[s] her individual act of challenge and defiance to become part of the public record of social opposition to the authoritarian political structures and patriarchal hierarchies of Egyptian society” (p. 138). By telling her story, Firdaus is “contesting and confronting an entire tyrannical system” (Gohar, 2016, p. 184). I refute Spivak’s (1988) claim that in this case the intellectual elite is representing the subaltern because El Saadawi “provides sufficient narrative space for her subaltern protagonist to speak and tell her own story” (Gohar, 2016, p. 185).

Firdaus is not being orientalized as “the Other,” the inferior, in that she is named after “heaven” and not “hell.” Moreover, Firdaus’s death could symbolize a rebirth; that is why the novel is called *Woman at Point Zero*—because she is born again. She lives on despite her death. Firdaus only agrees to meet El Saadawi so as to pass on the message of truth to humanity. She tells the reader the reason why they have sentenced her to death: “They condemned me to death not because I killed ... but they condemn me to death because they are afraid of my life, and they know that if I were to live that I would kill them. My life means their death and my death means their life” (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 110).

Firdaus is not the typical oppressed Arab woman who has no agency. Firdaus runs away when she is forced to marry Shaykh Mahmoud, who is forty years her senior. She takes action and kills her pimp at the end of the novel. She tries to transform her weaknesses into power, such as her finding power in prostitution. Firdaus tries to take control over her body and sexuality. She is not presented as someone who is highly sexual, as in Orientalist stereotypes, because she shows that she cannot enjoy sexual intercourse. Firdaus finds that money brings her power when she becomes a first-class prostitute and can choose her customers and demand money. She can hire lawyers, she can sue who she wants, and she can meet powerful people. Moreover, Firdaus says that being a prostitute has given her power in the sense that it protects her from the pain of being an oppressed and abused woman in Egyptian society. She realizes that if she takes possession of her own body, she can be in control. The narrator describes how Firdaus enforces her power when she tears up the money that one of her rich customers gives her: she says that it is “as though I were tearing my uncle’s piaster, and tearing my husband’s piaster, and tearing my husband, and tearing my father, and tearing Marzuq, tearing Bayoumi and Diya and Ibrahim, and tearing all the men I have seen, and tearing the remains of the piaster of every man on my finger, and tearing my finger too” (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 107). These words show signs of her rage and rebellion.

Though El Saadawi employs stereotypes, she uses them “to criticise patriarchal systems” (She, 2010, p. 91). As Govender remarks about El Saadawi, by “taking up the age-old stereotype of the Egyptian prostitute[,] ... she addresses a number of pertinent social, economic and political issues fundamental to the life of women in a patriarchal, Islamic society such as Egypt” (1996, p. 55). For example, when she is having sexual intercourse with a customer, Firdaus is described as “some passive, lifeless thing, refusing to surrender, undefeated. Its passivity was a form of

resistance” (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 102). Firdaus tries to change her class but she cannot stop the impact of all the systems of oppression: the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal. She is able to find cracks and fissures in the structural powers of her society. She manages to fight the patriarchal gaze by being economically independent and getting her own food, rather than have someone watch over every mouthful. Even though this woman is oppressed, she gains power when she resists the subject positions offered to her and attacks traditional roles.

As Françoise Lionnet comments, in “contemporary Western medical and anthropological literature ... the subject of excision has often been treated ... in an impassioned, reductionist, and/or ethnocentric mode which represents the peoples who practice it as backwards, misogynistic” (1991, p. 2). El Saadawi rebuts some Westerners who focus on circumcision and neglect other types of oppression. She believes that focusing on this issue widens the gap between first-world women and third-world women, contending that all women are circumcised in one way or another, “psychologically and educationally” (El Saadawi, 1980a, p. 77). After all, it could simply be a symbol of ultimate patriarchal oppression.

El Saadawi stereotypes men as evil, driven by sexual desires, and violent, but not all men are evil in the novel. For example, the male prison doctor at the beginning of the novel sympathizes with Firdaus and does not think she is guilty. Besides, men act as symbols of patriarchal oppression. Readers should remember that in Arabic literature there is a tendency for characters to be used as symbols of their countries/nations, and so readers should not overcondemn the stereotypical characters employed. Ouyang advises readers with no previous knowledge of the history and culture of the Arab world to familiarize themselves with it so as to understand that Arabic novels at times function as “novels of ideas,” “in which ideologies, disguised as characters, are expounded and tested as the events of the novel unfold” (1996, p. 459). For example, she says that “women in general, and prostitutes in particular, are often symbols of their countries or nations; their struggles are those of their countries trying to emerge from the ashes of a world that has been deeply affected by colonialism and the changes, positive and negative, that it brought” (p. 459). Firdaus can be interpreted as a symbol of her country, Egypt, which is prostituting itself for others—in this case local and outside interests. Saliba argues that “the prevalent figure of the female prostitute signifies the nation prostituted to the colonizer for superficial gains, bands of gold, and the false beauties of Western ‘modernization’” (1995, p. 133). So El Saadawi sees how the patriarchal class system is linked to neocolonialism. As Saliba rightly contends, “[T]o reduce El Saadawi’s work to an exercise of Western consciousness ... is to ignore her explicit critique of the patriarchal class system as an outgrowth of Western imperialism, which oppresses women socially, politically, and economically worldwide” (1995, p. 138).

In short, El Saadawi’s novel *Woman at Point Zero* is not orientalizing the East. To claim this is to incorrectly frame the novel and misread it, thus diminishing its artistic merit and limiting its interpretations. El Saadawi occupies a space in-between in which she employs stereotypes at times and yet also challenges them at the same time. She is against neocolonialism, and if she presents the vices of Egyptian society, this does not mean she is calling for Western intervention. She is affected by Western discourse but not to the extent where she essentializes or orientalizes the East. El Saadawi realizes that not all women are oppressed in the same way, and the theory of intersectionality helps to show that Arab women undertake multiple jeopardy and that the relationship between these forces of oppression is multiplicative. Firdaus is concurrently oppressed by patriarchy, capitalism, domestic violence, hypocritical religion, classism, sexual slavery, heterosexism, surveillance, and others. Islam does not oppress women but the hypocritical application, and misinterpretation, of Islam does. El Saadawi’s use of Orientalist stereotypes in

Woman at Point Zero does not feed into the West's fear of the Middle East or of Islam. If readers project their own stereotypical mapping onto the novel, that is due to their own biases and is not the fault of the novel or the novelist. As Saliba contends, though "it may be limiting to read all third world literatures as anti-imperialist, it is nonetheless important for Western readers to interrogate their privilege in order to understand the violence that we do to third world women, both in real political terms, and through our interpretation of their experience" (1995, p. 143). Besides, there are other Arab women writers whose books are translated into other languages and who present a different viewpoint to show the complexity of the Arab world. No one Arab woman author can be perceived to represent all Arab women.

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