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## Interrogating the Male-Female Gender Dichotomy in Nawal El Saadawi's Woman at Point Zero

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## Interrogating the Male-Female Gender Dichotomy in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*

By Benon Tugume<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This article examines the male-female gender dichotomy in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*. Firdaus, the woman protagonist in the novel, after a careful observation of her own life and the status of women in her patriarchal society, postulates that men are criminals and women are prostitutes. Firdaus' dichotomy of the male and female gender into criminals and prostitutes respectively is the focus of the discussion in this article. This paper analyzes Firdaus' life of captivity by the forces of oppression right from childhood to womanhood and eventually to prison awaiting execution for committing murder. It applies Nawal El Saadawi's strand of feminism, particularly the theory's main tenet of the links among patriarchy, class, and religion, to examine the systems responsible for women's oppression. The focus is on class oppression, male hegemony, and deception. Using Frantz Fanon's theory of violence, the article discusses Firdaus' use of women's liberative violence to extricate themselves from men's captivity. Firdaus kills Marzouk, the pimp, to free herself and achieve total liberation. Consequently, her refusal to live and her fearlessness of death when sentenced to die by the Egyptian court of law symbolize her resolve to achieve freedom and dignity not in her phallogocentric society but in death. In this article, I argue that the male oriented justice system criminalizes Firdaus and gives her the maximum sentence of death to permanently silence her and thwart her struggle for liberation through physical and moral attacks on the male hegemony and religious idiosyncrasy of her society.

*Keywords:* Gender dichotomy, Class oppression, Male hegemony, Female liberative violence

### Introduction

This article examines Nawal El Saadawi's<sup>2</sup> *Woman at Point Zero* using her strand of feminist theory. The analysis focuses on Firdaus, the protagonist and main narrator, whom the author, in the preface to the novel, describes as "a woman driven by despair to the darkest ends" (El Saadawi, xii). In *Woman at Point Zero* women are powerless and subordinate to men. This limits and diminishes women's say in their society. In the novel, machoism consumes the female gender. Women therefore sometimes resort to exploiting the desire that men have for women's sexuality which in most—if not all—cases escalates the exploitation problem. They usually crawl out of the power game heavily maimed and bruised both physically and psychologically.

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<sup>2</sup> This article is the first article published in the JIWS following the recent death of Nawal El Saadawi on March 21, 2021. Her death robbed the world of a great literary icon. She spoke and wrote vehemently about the plight of women in "third world" countries, stressing the need for equality between men and women in order to rid society of gender-based violence. She will always be remembered for her great works especially *Woman at Point Zero* which, to use Longinus' words, is a work of the sublime.

Most women, including Firdaus, are aware of the power that men have over them; it is the reason they refer to men as ‘they’. Firdaus says that men are “all the same, all sons of dogs, running around under various names” (El Saadawi, 55). Men attain the dubious reputation of dogs in the battle of the sexes. Women can no longer trust them but have no option since they are already bound by virtue of their lot. As Kate Braverman argues, “of course men are like dogs, with their intoxication of blood, their petty lusts and non-existent attention spans” (Braverman, 77). All the male characters involved in Firdaus’ life are criminals interested only in her genitalia. She wants to have a dignified life but, like all women in her society, she is forced into prostitution by men.

Women in El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* are oppressed, harassed, and sexually abused by men. Consequently, Firdaus is forced into a defensive and ambivalent position because her life is tragically defined by the male ego and her social class status. Thus, “clearly, if you are poor, black, and female you get it in three ways” (Spivak, 294). However, in the context of Egyptian society, Firdaus suffers not because of her color, but because she is a woman living in a patriarchal society that masculinizes sex and she comes from a poor background.

This article therefore analyzes Firdaus’ life of captivity by the forces of oppression from childhood to womanhood and eventually to prison where she is awaiting execution for committing murder. I examine Nawal El Saadawi’s strand of feminism, which helps us to understand the author’s ideology, her style of writing, and her choice of themes and characters, especially her portrayal of Firdaus. I apply the main tenet of El Saadawi’s historical socialist feminist theory—the tripartite relationship between patriarchy, class, and religion—to examine the systems responsible for women’s oppression. Furthermore, the study analyzes Firdaus’ life first, as a young girl; second, as a woman in the domestic setting; third, as an industrial worker; and fourth, as a prostitute. The analysis focuses on class oppression, male hegemony, and deception as militating forces against Firdaus’ attainment of freedom to realize her dreams. In addition, I discuss Firdaus’ use of female liberative violence to counter male violence and hence liberate herself from male captivity.

### **Nawal El Saadawi’s Strand of Feminism: An Overview**

Nawal El Saadawi has written significantly to advance feminism and women’s liberation from patriarchal forces of oppression. Her writing, informed by her own strand of feminism, is explosive and radical; she has stirred up unease across Egyptian social, political, and religious circles. Born on October 27, 1931 in Kafr Tahlah Egypt when the country was under British colonial rule, El Saadawi started to pave her way to independence on a variety of levels at an early age. She has lived a robustly varied life, ostensibly writing and speaking about the plight of women in a manner that borders militancy. Her stinging views on prostitution, domestic violence, and religious idiosyncrasies often provoke outrage from Egyptian authorities and religious leaders. El Saadawi’s radicalism began in her infancy when she refused to be a child bride and instead opted to pursue education. As a child, she was traumatized by the ordeal of forceful circumcision and this fact is recalled bitterly in *Woman at Point Zero* where she creates a fictional character—Firdaus—in an attempt to hit back at a society that torments women. She, therefore, writes from her own life experiences, blending it with her fictional character Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero* in an attempt to create a wholesome experience about women’s oppression in her society.

In a film interview conducted by Omnia Amin<sup>3</sup> Nawal El Saadawi asserts that feminism means women's liberation. She stresses that her strand of feminism is based on Egyptian history. She disagrees with the claim that feminism is a western invention and that Egyptian feminists are imitating American or European women. She states that there are many different feminisms in the world. She calls her own feminism 'historical socialist feminism' because it is linked to Egypt's history of colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism that has divided her society into social classes. She argues that she differs from many feminists from the west who are unconscious of class differences because most women in those countries are highly educated and economically comfortable, having come from the middle class or upper class. She asserts that, as an Egyptian woman who came from the poor working class in the village, she cannot remove class difference from women's liberation. She therefore argues that the liberation of women and the realization of equality between men and women depends on having equality between classes (the poor and the rich) and also between rich and poor countries. She stresses that to have global feminism, the gap between the rich and the poor countries must be addressed so that we don't have countries fighting just to live and survive, a condition that exacerbates the plight of women.

Nawal El Saadawi identifies religious fundamentalist movements as one of the obstacles to women's liberation. She observes that in every religion (especially, but not exclusively, the world religions of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism) there is a fundamentalist movement, and these fundamentalists have gained power especially with increasing capitalism and the emergence of right-wing politics. She states that all major religions are patriarchal, based on a male God and hence male domination. Therefore, whenever there are revival movements, women are oppressed. Religious revivals emerge because of capitalism and the politics of right-wing people. El Saadawi argues that capitalists need God to justify injustices and the oppression of women and the poor. She states that feminism cannot be understood—and so liberation of women cannot be understood—unless there is a deliberate link between history, economics, politics, religion, and philosophy. She asserts that the biggest challenge today is how to fight religious fundamentalist groups and the link between religion and politics. However, she suggests that the solution lies in collective creative thinking and activism such as in the 5<sup>th</sup> World Women's Studies conference held in Bangkok, where people met in 2019 to deliberate freely without being afraid of supernatural powers in heaven either after death or over life.

Nawal El Saadawi states that men and women should discuss religion, class, and gender frankly without fear of being condemned and branded by religious fundamentalists as atheist, irreligious, and immoral or being called communists or man haters. She observes that the world is divided and dominated by systems such as patriarchy, capitalism, religious fundamentalism, and imperialism, and the biggest challenge is to break the barriers, come together, communicate and become more powerful. She is optimistic about the future for men and women because ideologies are changing for the better. She urges writers and creative people to create more awareness and organize for women's liberation. El Saadawi, therefore, writes with a woman's voice that is significantly feminist with neither fear nor apology, challenging old systems and institutions that are responsible for the oppression of women. She argues that creativity and

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<sup>3</sup> Nawal El Saadawi gave the film interview to her translator Omnia Amin on the occasion of the 5<sup>th</sup> World conference on Women studies in Bangkok organized by Professor Diana Fox. El Saadawi was unable to attend the conference due to illness. The film interview - available at <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol20/iss5/1/> - was downloaded, transcribed and the tenets of her feminist theory captured and analyzed in relation to the novel.

dissidence are related because creativity leads to dissidence. She stresses that a dissident refuses authority, oppression, and injustice by fighting back.

This article therefore applies Nawal El Saadawi's strand of feminist theory to analyze the life experiences of Firdaus, the woman protagonist in *Woman at Point Zero*. This novel is a daring exploration and exposition of the plight of Firdaus who is engulfed in the fight for freedom and liberation from the grip of the patriarchal forces engineered by religion, the family, the house, and the imprisonment of and by the female body—the clitoris that symbolizes the woman's existence. Firdaus' life revolves around her genitalia, which seems to dictate her fate. The emphasis is all about the violence and denied justice from which the author intends the meaning of her work to be derived. Firdaus' life comes in three distinct phases: First, the seemingly naïve but critical dissident who calmly attacks systems responsible for her suffering; second, the materialistic Firdaus who comes to the realization that she can use her sexuality to her advantage; and third, the Firdaus who breaks out of the imprisonment she has been subjected to realizing that even with the power of wealth, it has failed to satisfy the raging fire in her against capitalism, patriarchy, and religious hypocrisy. Firdaus shares with the author the critical and radical stance on issues affecting her as a woman.

### **Class Oppression, Male Hegemony, and Deception**

Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* is set in the Egyptian capitalist society characterized by a class system. The novel portrays the link between class oppression and male hegemony to women's oppression. Firdaus is born into an extremely poor peasant family. As she says, "her father was a poor peasant farmer who could neither read nor write, knew very little things in life except how to grow crops and exchange his virgin daughter for a dowry" (El Saadawi, 10). Her duties as a girl in the home included: "carrying heavy earthen ware jar, full of water on her head; sweeping under the animals and then making rows of dung cakes which she would leave in the sun to dry. On the baking day, she would knead dough and make bread" (El Saadawi, 11-12). At an early age, Firdaus develops a great longing for means of sustenance and love, both in affection and sexual pleasure. In her poverty-stricken family, she grows up to always see her father beat up her mother, and sometimes she is abused too. She could hardly get a piaster<sup>4</sup> from her father. She experiences sexual pleasures with Mohammaden at an early age before she was subjected to the cruel societal practice of female circumcision carried out by her mother and the circumciser—a woman strange to her. Genital mutilation denies her sexual satisfaction and becomes a mark of Firdaus' female identity. When she later engages in incestuous sexual intercourse with her uncle, she confesses:

He was doing to me what Mohammadain had done to me before. In fact, he was even doing more, but 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 (El Saadawi, 13).

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<sup>4</sup> The currency of Egypt until 1834.

Firdaus' ability to wield her sexuality gets decapitated, and this has physical and psychological effects on her as it leaves an indelible mark in her memory. Consequently, "She not only loses physical sensation, but also a psychic bond with the mother...in participating in her daughter's genital mutilation, the mother broke the bond with her daughter, and Firdaus no longer saw or experienced her mother in the same way" (Abullah, 81). Genital mutilation deprives her of the pleasure of sex and an understanding of her body rhythms. It conditions her to bow down to the patriarchal system that subjects women to humiliation and enslavement.

Firdaus' first experience with male hegemony and chauvinism is with her father. Because of poverty in her family, it is her father who scrapes off the limited resources available. In winter, he denies the daughter the warmth she needs badly for survival at her tender age. As Firdaus says:

Our hut was cold, yet in winter my father used to shift my straw mat and my pillow to the small room facing north and occupy my corner in the oven room. And instead of staying by my side to keep me warm, my mother used to abandon me alone and go to my father to keep him warm. In summer I would see her sitting at his feet with a tin mug in her hand as she washed his legs with cold water. When I grew a little older, my father put the mug in my hand and taught me how to wash his legs with water, I had now replaced my mother and did the things she used to do (El Saadawi, 16).

As the passage above illustrates, it is a double tragedy for both the mother and the daughter. The mother's status is reduced to that of a machine, a human incubator that provides warmth. She ceases being a wife and is now demeaned to the status of an implement. The daughter is shifted to the colder section of the hut in abandonment because the father has to strategically enjoy the warmth of both the mother and the oven. It is even worse when it comes to scarcity of food. The husband matters more than the daughter and the wife who prepares it. As Firdaus says:

My father never went to bed without supper; no matter what happened. Sometimes when there was no food at home, we would all go to bed with empty stomachs. But he would never fail to have a meal. My mother would hide his food from us at the bottom of one of the holes in the oven. He would sit eating alone while we watched him. One evening I dared to stretch out my hand to his plate, but he struck me a sharp blow over the back of my fingers (El Saadawi, 17-18).

Firdaus' narrative above is a harrowing story of patriarchal power and its blatant abuse. El Saadawi portrays Firdaus' father, "not just as irresponsible, but almost as greedy, ravenous, rapacious, devouring predator, anxious to consume every bit of food within reach and ensure that no one else gets any of it, and who is ultimately responsible for the death of his children" (Palmer, 95). Firdaus begins battling patriarchal behavior exhibited in her father at a tender age. Through this experience at home, she begins to evaluate her self-worth. She realizes that men have vast power and women do not have any power which limits and diminishes their say in the family. She too realizes that boys are more valued than girls as the excerpt below demonstrates:

For like most people, I had many brothers and sisters. They were like chicks that multiply in spring, shiver in winter and lose their feathers, and then in summer are

stricken with diarrhoea, waste away quickly and one by one creep into a corner and died. When one of his female children died, my father would eat his supper, my mother would wash his legs, and then he would go to sleep, just as he did every night. When a child that died was a boy, he would beat my mother, then have his supper and lie down to sleep (El Saadawi, 17).

Because of extreme poverty, Firdaus's family experiences a high infant mortality rate. Her father would not feel a loss when a child that died was a girl. But when a boy died, he would grieve and in frustration beat up the mother as if the poor woman was responsible for the death of the child. Her father commands power over her mother and has the right to treat her the way he wants, including battering her if he wishes.

When Firdaus loses both parents, she goes to live with her uncle in Cairo. Her uncle is a scholar, and this ignites and rekindles her long-buried ambition of acquiring an education as a means of liberation. When asked by her uncle what she would do in Cairo, Firdaus' response is ecstatic: "I will go to El Azhar and study like you" (El Saadawi, 16). She knows that education liberates and opens the door to freedom and power, especially for women. She must now re-define herself in terms of it. Firdaus' arrival in Cairo means more than just a journey for her. It signifies partial freedom to pursue her dream of education for women's empowerment. When she looks at herself in the mirror, she is confronted with an image of her late parents in herself that she rejects and denies. She states:

I stood in front of the mirror staring at my face. Who am I? Firdaus, that is how they call me. The big round nose I got from my father, and the thin-lipped mouth from my mother. A sinking feeling went through my body. I neither liked the look of my nose nor the shape of my mouth. I thought my father had died yet here he was alive in the big, ugly, rounded nose. My mother, too, was dead but continued to live in the form of this thin-lipped mouth. And here I was unchanged, the same Firdaus, but now clad in a dress and with shoes on her feet. I was filled with deep hatred for the mirror. From that moment I never looked at it again (El Saadawi, 20).

The image of her parents reflected in her appearance is what she must change. She lives to hate her parents because they lacked love and compassion for her. She must rebrand herself, and school provides her an escape into that superior, exclusive class of privileged women who are able to enjoy privileges similar to those enjoyed by men. In this way, the race to school becomes more significant than just the physical journey.

Little does she know, her uncle who sexually molested her at her father's home is only interested in her sexuality. Her uncle wields too much power over her, and, like all men, he can do anything he wants with her. Firdaus' greatest point of weakness is her sexuality which El Saadawi posits as the greatest tragedy of any woman. She is defined by her genitalia, which her uncle and all the men in her life lust for; this is the point of men's conquest in the battle for power against women. Her uncle can take her to school as long as she is sexually relevant to him. By enrolling her in school, he raises her hopes high while he sets out to exploit her in many ways. As Firdaus states:



Once back I would sweep and clean the house, wash my uncle's clothes, make his bed, and tidy his books. He bought me a heavy iron which I would heat on the kerosene stove and use to launder his kaftan and turban. Shortly before sunset he would return from El Azhar. I served supper and we ate together (El Saadawi, 20).

This routine of house confinement does not cease for Firdaus. El Azhar becomes a symbol of superiority that can only be attained by few men of her uncle's calibre. It is a privilege that men enjoy that comes with its associated power and unequalled glory. Later on, when her uncle takes up duty in the Ministry of Wakfs and marries a daughter of his teacher at El Azhar, he feels he no longer needs Firdaus because he has found another sexual object. He has no option but to get rid of her by sending her to secondary school. She soon gets to learn that her uncle's marriage deprives her of a place in his heart, and the secondary education she has acquired does not help her to get employment, evidenced in the dialogue below between her uncle and his wife:

'It's not easy to find work these days when all you have is a secondary school certificate'

'What can she do then?'

'Nothing. These secondary schools don't teach them anything. I should have sent her to a commercial school'.

'It's no use talking of what you should have done. What are you going to do now?'

'She can stay with us until I get her a job.'

'That could be for years. The house is small, and life is expensive. She eats twice as much as any of our children'

'She helps you with the house and the children'.

'We have the servant girl and I cook. We don't need her (El Saadawi, 36).

The dialogue above demonstrates the sheer intra-animosity among the victims of the unfair system. Clearly, "woman is another woman's greatest enemy" (Quyoom, 897) is true here; jealousy and disunity among women undermine their struggle for justice and fairness. When her uncle's wife suggests that she gets rid of her by sending her to the university, the idea sounds ridiculous for Firdaus' uncle because Islam abhors women mixing with men in the name of education. The university education which is meant to empower people becomes exclusively for men and non-strict adherents of Islamic faith. This denies Firdaus, like other women, the chance to climb the social and economic ladder. At this juncture, "we see how a combination of male chauvinism and gender bias, female antagonism and jealousy, and religious hypocrisy proceed to thwart such a healthy and desirable outcome and contribute to her eventual destruction" (Palmer, 100). Firdaus is then thrown off to Sheikh Mahmoud, a deformed, ailing old man who is too superior to her age to generate bride price to pay off her uncle's debts (El Saadawi, 38). Again, it is her genitalia which is the item of this trade. She has now gone from being a sex object for her uncle to a money generating item to settle his indebtedness.

Firdaus begins a horrifying journey to womanhood. Mahmoud's open wound on his face exudes a nauseating stench and pus. She does not enjoy sex with him because his physical appearance is disgusting to her. She is battered by her husband, who, because of his patriarchal

and religious beliefs, considers her as his property. In order to escape domestic violence, she leaves her marital house and goes back to her uncle. But as she says:

My uncle told me that all husbands beat their wives, and my uncle's wife added that her husband often beat her. I said my uncle was a respected Sheikh, well versed with the teachings of religion, and he, therefore, could not possibly be in the habit of beating his wife. She replied that it was precisely men well versed in their religion who beat their wives. The precepts of religion permitted such punishment. A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience (El Saadawi, 46-47).

The statement above, that Islam permits wife battering, shows the highest level of religious idiosyncrasy and the illusion of religious piety. The Sheikhs are the agents of pain to their wives in contrast to religious teachings of love and kindness which should guide the conduct of such religious leaders. As Palmer argues, "El Saadawi presents a view of men all aspects of whose lives seem to be dominated by religion and who might even be sincere in their religious beliefs, but who cannot see the disconnection between this religious devotion and their treatment of their females, and who might even use this religious belief as justification for the subjugation of their wives, for the religion also stresses obedience was a duty" (Palmer, 91). Firdaus' uncle cannot see the disconnect between his religious beliefs and the mistreatment of Firdaus, whom he forces back to her abusive husband on the pretext that Islam permits total obedience of wives to their husbands. He justifies oppression of women on "false interpretation of religious scripts" (Suwaed, 5). Unable to cope with domestic violence and the foul-smelling pus coming from the swelling on Mahmoud's face, Firdaus abandons her marriage, and this time runs to the street to look for employment.

While on the street, Firdaus lands in Bayoumi's hands. Bayoumi initially appears to be a philanthropist who has come to rescue her from the street. Firdaus feels the man is a God sent angel. He offers her the niceties she had never dreamt of in life:

No one had asked me before whether I preferred oranges or tangerines. My father never bought us fruit. My uncle and my husband used to buy it without asking me what I preferred. As a matter of fact, I myself had never thought whether I preferred oranges to tangerines, or tangerines to oranges (El Saadawi, 50).

But Bayoumi's show of affection to Firdaus is deceptive. He is only interested in sleeping with her, as she states: "I ended up by sleeping in his bed throughout winter and the following summer" (El Saadawi, 51). He uses her as sex toy for himself until she realizes that the job he promised her is not forthcoming, as the dialogue below demonstrates:

'I cannot continue to live in your house', she stammered. 'I'm a woman and you are a man, and people are talking. Besides, you promised I'd stay only until you found me a job' He retorted angrily. 'What can I do, get the heavens to intervene for you?' 'You are busy all day in the coffee house, and you haven't even tried to find me a job? I'm going out now to look for one' I was speaking in low tones, and my eyes were fixed on the ground, but he jumped up and slapped me on the

face saying ‘How dare you raise your voice when you’re speaking to me, you street walker, you low woman?’ (El Saadawi, 52).

Bayoumi responds to Firdaus’ decision to quit his home by using both physical and sexual violence to subdue her. He turns his house into a prison by locking her in, raping her, and punching her every night; he even repeatedly invites his friends to rape her. Eventually, with the help of a neighbor she escapes from Bayoumi’s house to the street to recycle the same experience of sexual exploitation with other men.

Firdaus is fished out of the street this time by a woman prostitute, Sharifa, who recruits her into prostitution after explaining to Firdaus her philosophy of life, as shown in the dialogue below:

‘Everybody has to die, Firdaus. I will die, and you will die. The important thing is how to live until you die’.

‘How is it possible to live? Life is so hard’.

‘You must be harder than life, Firdaus. Life is very hard. The only people who really live are those who are harder than life itself’.

‘But you are not hard, Sharifa, so how do you manage to live?’

‘I am hard, terribly hard, Firdaus’.

‘No you are gentle and soft’.

‘My skin is soft, but my heart is cruel and my bite deadly’.

‘Like a snake?’

‘Yes, exactly like a snake. Life is a snake’ (El Saadawi, 57).

Sharifa’s argument above is that the world they are living in is male dominated, and in order for a woman to survive, she must deprive herself of any sympathy or feelings for anyone. She must do terrible things in order to survive. Sharifa believes that a woman’s worth is determined not by man, but herself. As Firdaus says:

Sharifa said to me one day. ‘Neither Bayoumi nor any of his cronies realized your worth, because you failed to value yourself highly enough. A man does not know a woman’s value, Firdaus. She is the one who determines her value. The higher you price yourself, the more he will realize what you are really worth, and be prepared to pay with the means at his disposal. And if he has no means, he will steal from someone else to give you what you demand’ (El Saadawi, 58).

Sharifa teaches Firdaus how to use her genitalia to command power over men. She rescues Firdaus out of the street and acts kindly only to take advantage of Firdaus’ body, which she pimps for her own aggrandizement. Sharifa makes money off of Firdaus’ pain. Even when she defends Firdaus against Fawzy, she does it selfishly to keep Firdaus for her own use. Firdaus’ life has become hard and made meaningless by the patriarchal system that has turned Sharifah into a snake to devour not only men but fellow women as well. Her sexuality makes her situation worse day by day, for even women like Sharifah who have crudely been shaped by the macho orientation strategically position themselves to pimp her out to the lustful men of Cairo. Unable to cope with Sharifah’s exploitation, Firdaus abandons Sharifa’s house and goes back to the

street where she meets a policeman, who is supposed to protect her from criminals, and he rapes her.

Pressed from all sides, Firdaus decides to take possession of her body as a prostitute because she has seen that, “all those who supposedly rescue her, men and women alike, end up using her for their own purposes” (Saliba, 135). As a prostitute, she raises the stakes and value of her genitalia because it is what all men desire and lust for. She uses prostitution as a method of finding freedom and power rather than enslaving herself. While with Di’aa, one of her clients, she avows: ‘you will have to pay me like all do. The time you can spend with me is fixed, and every minute counts as money’ (El Saadawi, 76). It is then that she realizes that she should not have engaged herself in the losers’ battle with men. It is the man’s lust and intoxication for a woman’s sexuality that gives Firdaus a semblance of power which, now, she must wedge into. Unlike married women who get imprisoned in the house and suffer this lust unpaid, men pay Firdaus highly to use her body. She takes possession of her body and becomes rich from prostitution, as she confesses:

How many were the years of my life that were lost before I tore my body and myself away from the people who held me in their grasp since the very first day? Now I could decide on the food I wanted to eat, the house I preferred to live in, refuse the man for whom I felt an aversion no matter what the reason, and choose the man I wish to have ... My bank account kept mounting all the time. I now had free time in which I could relax, go for walks, or to the cinema or the theatre, time to read newspapers and discuss politics with the few close friends I selected from the many who hovered around me seeking to strike up a friendship (El Saadawi, 74).

Firdaus’ sexuality grants her economic power to command men and make her own choices. She raises the price higher and higher for men who lust for her. She now dines with high rank dignitaries, including princes. Money gives her power over the very people who look down on her. She can now hire lawyers to defend her. She orders for what she desires, and even men fall under her power. She joins the exclusive class of the wealthy people until Di’aa, a journalist friend and client tells her that prostitution is not respectable:

‘You are not respectable’ he replied, but before the words ‘not respectable’ had even reached my ears, my hands rose to cover them quickly, but they penetrated into my head like the sharp tip of plunging dagger. He closed his lips tightly. A sudden deep silence enveloped the room, but the words continued to echo in my ears, took refuge in their innermost depths, buried themselves in my head, like some palpable object, like a body as sharp as the edge of a knife which had cut its way through my ears, and the bones of my head to the brain inside (El Saadawi, 76).

Di’aa’s statement above resonates in Firdaus’ mind, calling upon her conscience to judge the morality of her business. Di’aa has realized that Firdaus as a prostitute is too powerful to be controlled by man. It becomes clear that “her financial and sexual autonomy strike at the very root of patriarchy, threatening the interests of male moralists” (Abdullah, 84). Di’aa, fully uses the male moralists’ phrase “you are not respectable” to hurt her ego and conscience so that she

abandons the business and accesses her genitalia free of charge. But as Palmer argues, “Firdaus had always been presented as an exemplary, well-intentioned young woman who had always wanted to earn her living and acquire self-respect by her own exertions and who was drawn into prostitution by others and by dire need. It is therefore not surprising that she should now be plagued by a sense of guilt” (Palmer, 107). Guilt forces her to abandon prostitution because even when she attains economic security, she realizes its source is dubiously the men who lust for her body without respecting her.

Armed with her secondary school certificate, she gets a job in one of the big industrial concerns. At first, she enjoys her job, but later she finds that the sexual harassment she receives from the so called socially acceptable job is even greater than that endured while being a prostitute. She says:

After I had spent three years in the company, I realized that as a prostitute, I had been looked upon with more respect, and been valued more highly than all the female employees, myself included. In those days I lived in a house with a private toilet I could enter any time and lock the door on myself without anybody hurrying me. 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 and could not be paid for by a mere rise in salary, an invitation to dinner, a drive along the Nile in somebody’s car. Nor was it considered the price I was supposed to pay in order to gain my director’s good will, or avoid the chairman’s anger (El Saadawi, 81-82).

The sexual harassment she meets at the company stuns her and portrays a grim picture about women’s emancipation. Women’s sexuality becomes a symbol of imprisonment and enslavement to patriarchal machinations in all sectors of her society. She resists her director’s sexual advances and innuendos and, as she says:

so the word went round that I was an honourable woman, and the most highly considered of all the female officials in the company. It was also said that none of the men had succeeded in breaking my pride and that not a single high-ranking official had been able to make me bow my head or lower my eyes to the ground (El Saadawi, 83).

At this point, Firdaus appears to be in charge of her body until she meets Ibrahim, the revolutionary chair of a committee devoted to defending the rights of the workers. Ibrahim emerges as a hero among the company’s employees because of his brave confrontation with administration and the owner of the company. Firdaus genuinely falls in love with Ibrahim and confesses this to her own colleague: ‘I am in love. ‘In love’.... Love has made me a different person. It has made the world beautiful’ El Saadawi, 90). She gives him her body willingly out of love and adoration. Her relationship with Ibrahim is the only true love she experiences in life. When she learns that Ibrahim is going to marry the daughter of the company’s owner, she feels betrayed. She realizes that she was used and duped by Ibrahim who, “embodies hypocrisy and opportunism” (Gohar, 181). She says:

I had never experienced suffering such as this, never felt a deeper pain... Never had I felt so humiliated as I felt this time. Perhaps as a prostitute I had known so deep a humiliation that nothing really counted. When the street become your life, you no longer expect anything, hope for anything. But I expected something from love. With love I began to imagine that I had become a human being. When I was a prostitute, I never gave anything for nothing but always took something in return. But in love I gave my body and my soul, my mind and all the effort I could muster freely (El Saadawi, 93).

The pain Firdaus feels after being deceived and rejected by Ibrahim because of her social class status is so deep. Ibrahim leaves her because she belongs to the class of the poor and therefore, she offers no material benefits to him. It becomes clear to her that, “class inequality and male hegemony are latent in female oppression” (Gohar, 182). She comes to the realization that “All women are victims of deception” (El Saadawi, 94). Thus, “in her outcry against male dominance, she exposes the multiple forms of hypocrisy and control used to gain authority over women” (Saliba, 135). She decides to hate men because they are “hypocrites practicing double standards and devoid of integrity” (Palmer, 110). She goes back to prostitution because, as she says:

I knew that my profession had been invented by men, and that men were in control of both our worlds, the one on earth, and the one in heaven. That men force women to sell their bodies at a price, and that the lowest body is that of a wife. All women are prostitutes of one kind or another (El Saadawi, 99).

Firdaus’ statement above is a result of her careful observation of the status of women in society and particularly her futile attempts to not become a prostitute. She argues that she “prefers to be a free prostitute, rather than an enslaved wife” (El Saadawi, 99). Her decision to take possession of her body as a prostitute, however, crumbles when Marzouk, the pimp, forces himself into her life. At this time in her life, she realizes that there is something missing in her claim for power: “Every time I tried to walk, I fell down, a force seemed to push me from behind, so that I fell forwards, or a weight from in front seemed to lean on me so that I fell backwards. It was something like pressure of the air wanting to crush me” (El Saadawi, 15). The patriarchal forces have a firm grip on her life and soul, denying her a meaningful life.

### **Female Liberative Violence**

Female liberative violence is the form of violence women use to counter male violence. While theorizing violence in the context of colonial domination and oppression of the native—a system of control that uses violence in a manner similar to patriarchy’s use of violence against women—Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, asserts that usually the oppressor speaks the language of pure force; he does not lighten the oppression nor seek to hide the domination. In doing so, the oppressor brings violence into the home and mind of the oppressed (Fanon, 38). He further argues, the violence which has ruled over the ordering of the oppressed world—which has ceaselessly drummed the rhythm for the destruction of the oppressed—that same violence will be claimed and taken over by the oppressed at the moment when deciding to embody history in his own person (Fanon, 40). When we apply Fanon’s theory of violence to the women’s situation in *Woman at Point Zero*, we realize that by using violence to oppress woman, man is

the bringer of violence into the mind of the woman who at a specific moment in her life claims the same violence and uses it against her oppressor in order to liberate herself from male captivity. In the preface to the novel, Nawal El Saadawi states that during the three months she spent in gaol, she saw a number of women who were accused of having killed a man (El Saadawi, xii). These women used the same violence men had subjected them to for a long time to liberate themselves from patriarchal control. Firdaus is one of the women in the prison accused of killing a man. By the time she kills the pimp, she has had a long history of suffering various forms of violence from various men she encountered; she was subjected to domestic violence by her husband Sheikh Mahmoud on various occasions for no good reason, battered by Bayoumi and forced to have sex with him, and the policeman found her on the street and raped her. So, when Marzouk forces himself into her life, Firdaus is determined to liberate herself from the bigot. She first tries to buy him off with a sum of money the way she bought her freedom from prison for refusing to sleep with an important man, but Marzouk rejects it. He insisted on sharing her earnings from her job as a prostitute. He tells her that he does not mix love with business: “my capital is women’s bodies” (El Saadawi, 101). Even when Firdaus at last feels that she has used her body to become rich and access power, she discovers that she is at the mercy of men. She cannot match the likes of Marzouk because, in her own words:

I discovered he was a dangerous pimp who controlled a number of prostitutes, and I was one of them. He had friends everywhere, in every profession, and on whom he spends his money generously. He had a Doctor friend to whom he had recourse if one of his prostitutes became pregnant and needed an abortion, a friend in the police who protected him from raids, a friend in the courts who used his legal knowledge and position to keep him out of trouble and release any of the prostitutes who found herself in goal, so that she was not held up from earning money for too long. I realised I was not nearly as free as I had hitherto imagined myself to be. I was nothing but a body machine working day and night so that a number of men belonging to different professions could become immensely rich at my expense (El Saadawi, 103).

Firdaus’ utterance above shows that the whole racket of profiteers comprises of men. The money machine at the center point is the female body, which has been reduced to an object. It ceases to be human but a gold mine which must be exploited. Marzouk is conscious of this fact. He assures Firdaus that there are two categories of people: ‘masters and slaves’. It is herein implied that master is masculine, and slave is feminine. When she claims that she wants to be one of the masters and not one of the slaves, he quickly puts her in her rightful category by declaring to her: “How can you be one of the masters? A woman on her own cannot be a master, let alone a woman who is a prostitute. Can’t you see you are asking for the impossible?” (El Saadawi, 104). From this dialogue, Firdaus realizes that her vulnerability still remains because power, in reality, lies with men. Thus, “in the eyes of men, the woman’s body is a plaything, an object of pleasure, perhaps, most men can have whenever and wherever they please, and on their own terms” (Otu, 49). When she finds herself enslaved by Marzouk, she decides to leave him and give up prostitution, but he prevents her from leaving. At this moment, Firdaus realizes that she has lost the battle for freedom, emancipation, and identity. In the scuffle with Marzouk over her freedom, Firdaus snatches a knife from him, kills him, and walks the streets of the city. As Kammampool observes, “the street has been symbolic in the development of the character of Firdaus. The

streets open her eyes to reality and raise her perception to a higher level...the street liberates her from the domination of men. Whenever she faces some oppression from men she runs out to the street and it has become the only safe place” (Kammampol, 27).

Firdaus, as a high-class prostitute, is picked up from the street by a prince from a neighboring country. By this time in her life, her hatred towards men had reached fever pitch because she was desecrated more and more by them. She had re-valued herself according to what the men sentenced her to, and so she tears the money the prince gives for her services and even slaps him when he questions her power. She is determined to use female liberative violence to extricate herself from men’s captivity. The image of slapping the prince and killing the pimp demonstrates a sharp contrast to the Firdaus we have seen constantly abused and used in the earlier phases of the novel. She rejects the status of, “the subaltern woman who is ever mute” (Spivak, 295) and becomes liberal, assertive, and stronger in her relationship with men. She is aware that it is the gender power politics that is causing her grief, and by her own declaration that all women are prostitutes and all men are criminals, she explicitly implies that her gender is her own tragedy and that men, who have used her as an object of pleasure and dumped her, are criminals. 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” (Gohar, 183). She reclaims her freedom and glory by murdering Marzouk. It is clear that “although the hero of the story is on the verge of death, she manages to destroy the subject of her oppression, exploitation, humiliation and expropriation. She has become the ‘master’ and the pimp the ‘slave” (Kammampol, 23). Even with the possibility of sending an appeal to the president asking him to pardon her, she refuses because first, by doing so would imply that she is guilty, but she is innocent for she killed a criminal, and second, she cannot face life again as a doubly disgraced woman. Thus, “Firdaus has turned the complete negation of women to the zero degree into a self-claimed space where she can no longer be subjected. Yet because she cannot exist as a subject within the existing patriarchal class system, she must be hanged” (Saliba, 135). She feels her freedom and dignity can be found, not in her phallogocentric society, but in death. As El Saadawi asserts in the preface to the novel that in three months she spent in gaol what distinguished Firdaus from other women accused of having killed a man was Firdaus’ “absolute refusal to live, her absolute fearlessness of death” (El Saadawi, xii). Firdaus is ready to face death because she has achieved her liberation by killing the pimp (the tormentor and symbol of male hegemony) the consequence of which is that they in death are equal. By hanging Firdaus, “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” (Gohar, 182). The male-oriented legal system criminalizes Firdaus and gives her maximum sentence of death to permanently silence her and hence thwart her liberation struggle in the form of physical and moral attack against male hegemony and religious idiosyncrasy of her society.

## **Conclusion**

All the men Firdaus has encountered in life have had an impact on her. They have subjected her to oppression, sexual abuse, and violence. It becomes clear to her that no matter what she does, men are out to abuse her sexuality and oppress her. They have treated her like a



plaything and then discarded her into the gutters of society to flow along with many of her kindred. She has spent all her life in men's captivity, from childhood to womanhood. She cannot make choices because she is enslaved and imprisoned by men. Sex and her sexuality have provided a business tool for the men rather than a private and intimate identity for her. She kills Marzouk as a signal to break away from men's captivity only to end in a formal prison awaiting execution. She is sentenced to death to silence her struggle against women's oppression.

Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* is dedicated to women's struggle against patriarchy and sexism. In the novel, Firdaus struggles alone against male hegemony. She is viewed by the state and the male dominated Egyptian society at large as a bad example to the womenfolk and a threat to the established cultural and religious norms. Hence, she must be permanently silenced in order to halt the struggle for women's liberation and empowerment. The author applauds Firdaus's energy and determination to liberate herself from patriarchy. Gender inequality breeds conflict and violence which are detrimental to the well-being of both men and women. El Sadaawi seems to suggest that society should recognize women as human beings entitled to equal rights with men. Hence, women must be given equal treatment with men in order to stave off the effects of gender-based violence against both sexes. Reading *Woman at Point Zero* gives one the impression that El Saadawi advocates for women's liberation first, by liberating men from believing in patriarchal ideology, and second, by liberating the entire society from laws and social conventions that promote gender inequality.

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