

# Reclaiming the Female Body in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*

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**Abstract** This paper attempts a postcolonial feminist analysis of El Saadawi's novella *Woman at Point Zero* (1983) in terms of how the politics of female body, in the post(-)colonial metropolitan Egypt, subsume into predicaments like subordination in marriage, homelessness leading to prostitution, and female genital mutilation. Through the fictional narrative of her protagonist, Firdaus, El Saadawi unravels how the institution of marriage, in the Arab-African socio-cultural tapestry, has been tailored to serve the phallogocentric order in which women are trained to make up for the desire of men. This, at times, results in their rebellion against social and familial norms thus pushing them into homelessness and prostitution. Similarly, psycho-sexual violence against the female child makes her fear her own sexuality — a fear which often culminates in the genital mutilation of girls, especially in the Egyptian rural culture. Such oppression against women, in private and public spaces, is bound to affect female psychology which, in turn, leads to tragedies like the one experienced by Firdaus in El Saadawi's narrative.

**Key words** female body; prostitution; marriage; homelessness; female genital mutilation

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## **Nawal El Saadawi's Feminist Consciousness**

Nawal El Saadawi (1931—), in her fiction and non-fiction works, unapologetically discusses prostitution, clitoridectomy, incest and many other taboo issues—a fact

which earns both appreciation and criticism for her among her readers. In a nearly anthropological tone, she addresses the psychological consequences of women's oppression. This may be attributed to her background as a medical doctor as in her narratives, she tends to conduct diagnoses of problems troubling her characters. El Saadawi's approach to feminism can be safely categorized as radical, as she questions existing norms of her society and argues for the abolition of patriarchy on radical grounds. She is highly critical of the oppression against women legitimized in the name of religion and its various institutions. Female body and sexuality, female genital mutilation, prostitution and other taboo subjects (among Muslim societies) are what account for her standing as a radical feminist.

For Kammampal (15), Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* is

[A] call and an appeal to genuine Islamic religious texts to convince bigots to revisit, create and contrast discourse around religion and the outdated social patriarchal structures, which relegate the woman to the position of inferior being.

El Saadawi, through her non-fiction, has indeed been standing against socio-sexual aggression against the female child and reveals the experiences of young girls. They are taught to be afraid of their own sexuality from the very beginning of life. Similarly, she is vocal against female genital mutilation, as the practice is sometimes traumatizing enough to leave the child affected for a very long time. To El Saadawi, female genital mutilation is, in fact, an institutionalized degradation of women as it brings along a sense of intense shame to the female child. Similarly, on growing up, the girl's education is harnessed by cultural norms of shame and guilt that are sustained in her society by pseudo-religious arguments. Such an upbringing is bound to affect the psychological development of the girl; she is unable to think independently on growing up, trained to suppress her will and desire, and also make up for the desire of others in the name of marriage. This loss of self prepares her to live a life of subordination and oppression which, in cases of extremity, hovers on the edges of rebellion on the part of women. This is likely to result in their defiance to the familial and religious norms thus plunging into dilemmas like prostitution. To El Saadawi, therefore, there are numerous relations between woman as a daughter and a wife, woman as a prostitute, and woman as a slave to the man.

El Saadawi had to undergo imprisonment as a result of her efforts to publish a feminist magazine in Egypt. In prison, El Saadawi was denied pen and paper, and such a physical and intellectual captivity made her discover the importance of

revelation and self-expression. Through her personal and professional narratives, El Saadawi has been able to bring into limelight the everyday struggles of Egyptian women. These all converge into the overarching feminist goals that further address a wide array of issues. El Saadawi equates the liberation of women with the liberation of the country from the subordination of any old or new forms of colonialism. She fully acknowledges the relation between sex, politics, economics, history, and religion. Sexual aggression towards the female child, self-worth, education, freedom of expression, female genital mutilation and other similar topics have separated her from her contemporaries and earned her international fame.

### **Review of Related Literature**

With reference to the question of female space among Arab African Muslim societies, the status of Nawal El Saadawi as a feminist is remarkable because of her revolutionary stance on the subjectivity of Arab women. For El Saadawi, feminism paves way to social change. Tarabishi is, however, critical of El Saadawi's stand which is ambiguous and strives to bring about change on secular grounds in a social scheme which clearly draws its inspiration from religion. On the other hand, Fadwa Malti Douglas in her monograph, *Men, Women and God(s): Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics* (1995), celebrates El Saadawi's narratives as these are characterized by a protest against sexual violence, female infibulation, theology and other issues. The third chapter of Douglas' book is based on the relation between the physician and the prostitute in El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*. The narrative in El Saadawi's novella is designed for reclaiming the female body both orally and verbally. The story essentially addresses the tension between dream and reality which comes from society, patriarchy, religion, sexuality and women centricism.

The ritual practice of female circumcision in Arab and African societies is a matter of cultural relativism. This has been the pivot of debate in Fran Oise Lionnet's essay "Dissymmetry Embodied: Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and the Practice of Excision." To Lionnet, the discursive context of the practice is of exceeding significance against which the ideology of cultural relativism should be tested. It is the gendered cultural identity of Muslim women in many countries of the Arab world and Africa which is characterized infibulation and female excision. The practice is meant to improve and especially monitor the sexual condition of women's bodies in the African socio-cultural ethos. Moreover, Lionnet appreciates El Saadawi's role both as a novelist and a psychiatrist. To her, psychoanalysis, if not severed from socio-discursive practices, can certainly help fight against those tendencies and discourses that perpetuate female subjugation.

In her essay “Between Awra and Arab Literary Feminism: Sexual Violence and Representation Crisis in Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero*” (2012), Ana Ball discusses the nature of sexual violence which is foregrounded by El Saadawi in her novella. Sexual violence, according to Ball, is a crime. With respect to Arab feminist and literary discourse, the issue of sexual violence generally suffers from representational crisis. Ball mentions the term *awra* which stands for all in a woman’s body which should be concealed and is deemed shameful. For Ball, the polemics of female sexual violence and its representation is the direct result of the alignment of *awra* with the female body and subsequently with female sexuality. El Saadawi’s take on the female body, its sexuality, and violence against it involves the politics of second-wave feminism that struggles to speak for the sexuality of the present-day Arab women.

Saddik Gohar in “Empowering the Subaltern in *Woman at Point Zero*” studies El Saadawi’s novella with a Western feminist lens. With a view that comparative feminist discourse has the potential to initiate useful dialogue with regard to patriarchal policies in the Arab world, Gohar argues how El Saadawi challenges the phallogocentricity of the Egyptian metropolis which draws its power from both religion and masculinity. The novella effectively dissects canons which are culturally grounded and deconstructs regressive norms that establish and legitimize patriarchal hegemony. As a prison psychiatrist, El Saadawi interrogates how female condition and experiences are dehumanized by a culture which is typically misogynistic in its treatment of women. Nevertheless, a narrative like that of El Saadawi’s centralizes the experience of the marginalized and imparts both voice and agency to the voiceless.

### ***Woman at Point Zero: A Tale of Female Drudgery***

Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* explores issues of oppression, corruption, and violence against women. The narrator of the story is an unnamed psychiatrist who happens to visit Firdaus, a murderer, who is destined to be executed the following morning. The plot revolves around the life of Firdaus as she unfolds it right from her childhood. Daughter of peasants, Firdaus was able to reach secondary school and graduated too. Nevertheless, the misery began when she went with her uncle who first molested her sexually, and then took advantage of her by making her first serve himself and later his family. She is then married off to an old miserly man who mistreats her. Thus, she is pushed into a life where drudgery awaits her while she does not receive any help from others, especially men. In the course of her suffering, she meets a number of men who abuse her one way or the other. This

makes her escape from them again and again, and we come to know why Firdaus comes to develop hatred for men as she exclaims, "...every single man I did get to know, filled me with but one desire: to lift my hand and bring it smashing down on his face" (*Woman at Point Zero* 10).

Firdaus discovers that there are a scarce opportunities for a woman like her to get a respectable job. She, therefore, eventually ends up being a prostitute. She strives to establish herself respectably by joining an office but soon learns that a woman is nowhere unless she gives favors to the male superiors for getting promotions, benefits, or simply to keep her job. Such a life is what Firdaus denies as she believes in valuing herself. From all this, she learns that "...all of us were prostitutes who sold themselves at varying prices, and that an expensive prostitute was better than a cheap one" (*Woman at Point Zero* 82). Firdaus exposes the hypocrisy of many of the men who would come to her for lust. This is, in fact, a direct assault on the dual standards which characterize her society in general and men's world in particular, especially when it comes to dealing with sex workers.

Firdaus ultimately gives vent to her frustration. She has been shown falling into the same trap again and again. She murders the pimp who exploits her even when her body and honor are already on sale. Firdaus starts off as being extremely trusting and naïve but ends up realizing the folly of trusting anyone but herself. A woman suffers not because of what she does but that which others do. Firdaus' preference to death over life is an open rejection to live in such a condition: "I prefer to die for a crime I have committed rather than to die for one of the crimes which you have committed" (*Woman at Point Zero* 111).

### **Enslavement in Marriage**

Isaka (51) discusses the endogamous and exogamous trends of marriage existing in African and especially sub-Saharan cultures where, in either case, marriage renders women powerless. The female silence in marriage, which is fortified through cultural traditions, is what one sees happening in El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*. El Saadawi deconstructs the myth of security and public safety which is traditionally associated with marriage in various cultures. The family order, as depicted by El Saadawi, is a testimony to how patriarchy is part and parcel of the family framework in Egyptian society. Women are not more than commodities which are traded off when need be, while fathers single-handedly enjoy the privilege to decide who their daughters would marry irrespective of how such decisions may tell upon the latter. Firdaus, the narrator and the protagonist of the novella, is portrayed as a woman who remains silent most of the time, though it is not that

she is insensitive to what is happening around. Her uncle's wife discusses Sheikh Mahmoud's proposal for Firdaus with her husband. The uncle's respectability proves to be a mere sham, as he greedily thinks of selling his niece off to the old Sheikh for the dowry or bride price. And thus he asks his wife,

"How much?"

"A hundred pound or perhaps even two hundred if he has the money."

"If he pays hundred pound then Allah will indeed have been generous to us. I would not be greedy to ask for more." (*Woman at Point Zero* 38)

Feminist authors of Arab-African literature have projected women in the middle of family oppression. Their commoditization grows from father and kinsmen to husband and his kinsmen. Sheikh Mahmoud is an old, miserly, deformed and tyrannical man who buys Firdaus ultimately. As for Firdaus, she has to follow the current and accept silently whatever is inflicted on her. This owes to the fact that she is a daughter and more importantly a woman. Thus Firdaus, like many other girls of her class and age, is marginalized as a female subaltern. Sherifa, in this regard, observes that "The Arab states embody various patriarchal structures and Arab society clings to a patriarchal system in which women's position within and duties towards the family precede their rights as individuals" (17).

Firdaus is sent back to the uncle's house by Sheikh Mahmoud who mistreats and beats his wife for petty things. "All husbands beat their wives" (*Woman at Point Zero* 46), are the words of the uncle for Firdaus which open up an entire debate on the pathos of female subjugation. Marriages, like that of Firdaus and Sheikh Mahmoud, give license to men for inflicting physical abuse on women. In the fictional world of El Saadawi, people's lives are seized by love, marriage, and tradition. The issue of female protection, under the father or the husband, is turned on its head in El Saadawi's novella. It rather serves as a tool to keep the women ensnared, since a woman without a male 'protector' in Muslim societies is deemed totally irresponsible. As Abdullah et al. holds, Sheikh Mahmud stands for phallogocentricity and also represents the repressive father figure who, among many others, causes hysteria to Firdaus. This is what Palmer (162) also upholds, since with her marriage to the repressive Mahmoud, Firdaus once again becomes a prisoner (after having been a prisoner in her father's and then her uncle's house). Mahmoud is an embodiment of the repulsive and patriarchal father figure, as he tries to tame Firdaus by beating and abusing her. In a way, he stands for the entire misogynistic and repressive order that is designed to exploit women like Firdaus.

For Abdullah et al. (105), Firdaus' desire to destroy "all men I had ever known, one after the other in a row: my uncle, my husband, my father ..." is symptomatic of the hysterical vortex she is pushed into because of her traumatic experiences with all these men. The pain inflicted on her by Mahmoud travels from physical to the psychic, as she keeps the memories of these experiences in store mentally. Firdaus associates Mahmoud with pain and especially abhors the swelling he had under his lower lip which sometimes would "turn into a rusty old tap exuding drops red in color like blood" (*Woman at Point Zero* 45). Moreover, she is repulsed by the painful sex inflicted on her by Mahmoud: "At night he would wind his legs and arms around me, and let his old gnarled hand travel all over my body, like the claws of a starving man who has been deprived of real food for many years ..." (*Woman at Point Zero* 45). In addition, she is destined to receive physical thrashing until she bleeds after which she is forced to have sex: "He leapt on me like a mad dog... I surrendered... my body to his body... as though life had been drained out of it, like a piece of dead wood... or a pair of shoes forgotten under a chair" (*Woman at Point Zero* 55).

These and many similar experiences with her husband compel Firdaus to believe that sex in marriage is identical to what takes place between a prostitute and his pimp. This explains why Firdaus' account of her sexual encounter with Bayoumi and Sheikh Mahmoud appears almost similar. Such drudgery on the part of married women is what stimulates Firdaus to philosophize that the least deluded of the women is the prostitute. This is because all women, in one way or the other, are prostitutes, "... and because I was intelligent, I preferred to be a free prostitute, rather than an enslaved wife" (*Woman at Point Zero* 91). Thus, it is not precisely husband or pimp in question, but the entire politics of gender inequality that influences the relationship between men and women. The female body thus becomes a site of contest for El Saadawi, where resistance can subvert the same normative power structures (characterized by male domination) that function to regulate women's subjugation in certain socio-economic schemata.

Firdaus goes back to her uncle complaining about her husband's ill-treatment but is silenced by his uncle's wife: "A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband.... Her duty was perfect obedience" (*Woman at Point Zero* 44). Firdaus is compelled to agree with the idea that her status in the society cannot surpass or be equal to that of a man, and that a woman has to go an extra miles to keep her husband pleased. Firdaus, however, is not ready to accept this and argues in response comparing her uncle with Sheikh Mahmoud as the former "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” (*Woman at Point Zero* 46). The satirical response of the aunt at this is shocking as to her it is the men “precisely well versed in the religion who beat their wives” (*Woman at Point Zero* 46). This tells that the uncle’s wife too is a victim of the self-defeating concept of marriage. Marriage, in the context of tradition, is thus a system based on human suffering. Tradition, be it in the view of the Arab-African or Egyptian context, gives acceptance to women only if they manage to survive in marriage. This is what makes women accept physical violence done by their husbands, as they consider it a folly to contest the tradition. This explains why Firdaus is finally taken back to Sheikh Mahmoud who, in response remarks, “Why did you come back from your uncle’s house? Couldn’t he bear to feed you for a few days? Now you will realize that I am the only person who can put up with you and who is prepared to feed you” (*Woman at Point Zero* 47).

Thus, women’s lives are rigorously controlled by the norms of fidelity, subservience, and religion. Religion has been twisted in favor of men thus establishing their supremacy and giving them license to ill-treat women. All a man is liable to do is just to pay the bride price and thus ‘buy’ the woman. Firdaus is exposed to the worst situation during her stay with the Sheikh: “The Sheikh is extremely cheap and cannot stand to waste food. On one occasion, he found scraps of food in the trashcan. After this incident, he got into the habit of beating me whether he had a reason for it or not” (*Woman at Point Zero* 44). Sheikh Mahmoud’s idea of marriage and the treatment he gives to his wife is more or less similar to what Firdaus saw her father doing when she was young. Both the men have been portrayed as religious—a fact juxtaposed to how they treat their families. The slave-like labor to which Firdaus’ father would subject his wife and young daughters represents how women are captivated within their own spaces of marginality. Thus, we see how Firdaus’ mother had to be obedient to her husband who enslaved her and made her “bite the dust each night” (*Woman at Point Zero* 10). Firdaus, therefore, experiences abandonment: “Our hut was cold, yet in winter, my father used to ... 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” (*Woman at Point Zero* 16). One, therefore, feels Firdaus challenging motherhood and the identity of her mother, since she is an emblem of slavish loyalty to her husband which Firdaus comes to loathe on growing up. The fear of her husband’s wrath, or that of being thrown out of marriage simply with a divorce, makes Firdaus’ mother let her children starve and fill the stomach of her husband,

...when there was no food at home, we would all go to bed with empty stomachs. But he (Firdaus' father) 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. (*Woman at Point Zero* 16)

People like Firdaus' uncle or Ibrahim (who appears later in the novella) use marriage as a means of shifting their social standing. This is what happens with Firdaus too, who is traded off in the name of marriage. Marriage and wifehood are thus agencies of socio-sexual and economic liability in a society which observes no equity in terms of male-female relations.

### **The Drudgery of Homelessness and Prostitution**

For Therese, the figure of the female prostitute, as it appears in Arab postcolonial literature, illustrates how the nation is prostituted to the colonizer for the sake of petty gains, bands of gold and the fake wholesale import of Western modernization. Post-World War I Egypt presents a picture where many Egyptian peasants and masses from the middle class showed growing discontent with the presence of the British colonizers, especially in terms of the corruption it inflicted on the traditional family and religious structures. With the mushrooming of prostitution around the British bases and in the streets of Cairo, there also grew the contamination of the political leaders who prostituted themselves to the colonial interests. This can also be seen in the sexual corruption of the lower class women whose misery and indignity became symptomatic of the condition of the then-existing Egypt. This is what Naguib Mahfouz asserts, as the Cairo neighborhood stood almost in a distinct isolation from the rest of the surrounding vicinity. This owes to the fact that its residents came in contact with the British occupation – a contact that dragged the young men into army and women into prostitution. In case of Egyptian men, as Therese informs, it can be seen that they collaborated with and benefited from the colonial presence, while the women were expected to keep their honor “intact”, thus safeguarding the burden of their culture and tradition.

In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus represents the female peasant class in Egypt which is victimized by the rigorous native tradition. This is further deteriorated by the postcolonial corruption which is evident in the burgeoning metropolitan culture of Cairo. Firdaus' embracing of prostitution gives out two-fold significance: firstly, it stands for her own idea of female liberation; secondly, it shows how this idea of liberation betrays and thus pushes her back into the same servile space she tries to

escape. Her journey begins as a wife, moves on to prostitution, leads her to become an office worker, and finally brings her back to prostitution. To her, therefore, all women are prostitutes who sell themselves at varying prices. In this connection, Hamam (185) establishes space as one of the major issues in El Saadawi's text. Firdaus feels forced to give up on the repressive space of marriage in search of a space of her own – one where she can live and breathe. Nevertheless, she tends to look for a homely or domestic space as she clearly misses the sense of belonging in her life. Unfortunately, the spaces provided by her father and then by her husband prove to be oppressive, and this compels Firdaus to seek security on streets and roads which eventually becomes her destiny. It is ironic that the same unknown life on streets, which is frightening and subjects Firdaus to masculine gaze and evil intentions, also gives her a sense of independence —one she has never experienced in her past domestic spaces. On streets, however, what Firdaus actually finds is slavery and exploitation embodied in men like Bayoumi who enslaves her by providing her food and shelter. Firdaus unconsciously compares Bayoumi with her father: "His nose resembled that of my father. It was big and rounded, and he had the same dark complexion" (*Woman at Point Zero* 49). This makes Firdaus feel that she is subjected to yet another man who will exploit her just because she owes her basics to him. Bayoumi entertains his friends by letting them have sex with Firdaus. So, the time she spends at Bayoumi's house reminds her of the misery and torture she went through at Sheikh Mahmoud's place after marriage.

Orabueze asserts that El Saadawi's novella serves as a "means to an end... [and] a metaphor for survival and freedom... because it gives her [Firdaus] all the good things she never had as a daughter, or as a wife, or as a student" (135). This is because her experience of marriage with Skeikh Mahmoud was a most horrid one, wherein she was accountable even for the quantity of food she had been consuming. Once plunging into prostitution, Firdaus herself determines her value and obtains a space of her own. For her body, Firdaus asks for a high price and chooses rich clean clients. Nevertheless, she demonstrates resistance by making her body passive in her sexual encounters. According to Hamam (193), money acts as an agential space in the life of Firdaus. It stands for the power Firdaus previously lacked and later on gained in order to break free from men. Money, to some extent, gives Firdaus back that sense of self-respect which she had lost during her childhood, then with her husband, and finally during her sexual encounters with her clients as a prostitute. Moreover, as Palmer puts, it is money which "open[s] her eyes to the nature of reality and the way the world works" (166-67). Again, it is money which the fathers and husbands deny to their daughters and wives, but use to attract women outside.

Money, in El Saadawi's novella therefore, is a metaphor for male power. Firdaus' act of tearing up the three thousand pound note is emblematic of her belief that such power should be destroyed by those who are controlled by it.

Towards the end of the story, Firdaus realizes that her upward mobility is illusory. Money takes away from her all fears—be it those of the street, or the ones belonging to men. However, she soon realizes that prostitution, with all its supposed luxuries, is yet another prison or a closed space where there is neither pleasure nor freedom, “I never even left the room. Day and night I lay on the bed, crucified and every hour a man would come in” (*Woman at Point Zero* 72). Moreover, her belief that a prostitute's life is better than that of a wife or a daughter is misleading. Firdaus is badly struck by Di'aa's words that she does not deserve respect, the realization that Sharifa and Marzouk are pimps exploiting her, and that men's ego suffers when rejected by prostitutes. All this happens when Firdaus has to have sex with the policeman who threatens her with imprisonment in case she resists. Actually, prostitution turns out to be the worst form of enslavement among all the various forms Firdaus goes through. The assumption that poor women like Firdaus can secure socio-individual mobility by earning money as prostitutes proves to be wrong (Hamam 185). Marzouk, a pimp himself, ironically offers protection to Firdaus in return of which he demands money. Until this time, however, Firdaus has already experienced the fact that for a prostitute, any kind of protection, especially when it is provided by a male, is yet another form of slavery. This is what Firdaus expresses, “I want to be one of the masters and not one of the slaves” (*Woman at Point Zero* 95). And Marzouk's response at this goes, “A woman on her own cannot be a master... can't you see that you are asking for the impossible?” (*Woman at Point Zero* 95). Firdaus couldn't possibly defeat Marzouk in his life and so stabs him to death. Hamam (195) suggests that postcolonial women writers have managed to create agential female spaces out of margins for themselves. These spaces are featured with willful acts of assertion and resistance offered by the female voice. Firdaus' is thus one such voice which emerges from the margin with certain energy which is strong enough to kill her so-called protector. Killing Marzouk is tantamount to debunking the myth of security as proclaimed by men in favor of women in Firdaus' society. Firdaus' act of killing Marzouk underlines the potential upheld by women to challenge the society and the status quo as they are no longer ready to stay silent. For Therese, Firdaus speaks from a zero point of subjectivity. The place is a completely vanishing point which is devoid of desire—a point where those in authority can no longer maintain their control of the subjugated ones. Firdaus is, therefore, destined to be executed since she refuses to submit to the

existing patriarchal order.

### **Female Genital Mutilation**

In *Woman at Point Zero*, one finds only a passing reference to the crucial and highly sensitive issue of female genital mutilation (FGM). This may come as a surprise to the readers of El Saaadawi who has been most vocally fighting this practice. Firdaus tells the doctor briefly how she went through the painful experience. In this connection, her excision may appear a matter of little concern to many, though at this point it is deemed necessary to discuss the issue at length. There have been critics (Valassopoulos, Schroeder,) who are of the view that it is Firdaus' experience of circumcision which proves to be her primordial trauma. The phenomenon deprives her of something the quest of which shapes and conditions her destiny. Firdaus's circumcision during her childhood may appear an unclaimed experience; she is made to go through it by her mother. In fact, she had to pay for her unleashed tongue:

So one day I asked my mother about [my father]. How was it that she had given birth to me without a father? First she beat me. Then she brought a woman who was carrying a small knife or may be a razor blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from between my thighs. (*Woman at Point Zero* 13)

Firdaus goes down the memory lane and tells the doctor about her first sexual sensations. A sensation of sharp pleasure is what she experienced during the contact that she had with a boy named Mohammadain. Firdaus acknowledges that such sensations would come from a point of the body which remained unidentified for her. This, however, happened before her circumcision after which she could no longer feel the pleasure if Mohammadain ever touched her. This makes her realize that she has been deprived of that specific part of her body. Such an idea enables Firdaus to draw erotic sensations from her reminiscences of the encounters she had with Mohammadain. Thus, Valassopoulos asserts,

A certain understanding of sexuality is foreclosed at the site of Firdaus' excision, which cannot be effectively retrieved. This somewhat situates her story within the framework of a lost pleasure that she continues to seek throughout the novel and that stands in for irretrievable experiences or an unimaginable life that reflects back to her unrecognizable image. (48)

Schroeder looks at the issue of female circumcision in terms of male power and female weakness. For this, a reference is made to Lightfoot-Klein's popular treatise on the subject titled *Prisoners of Ritual*, wherein the author outlines a certain view on the purposes of the practice. Just as the gods who are believed to be bisexual, human beings too are considered to be endowed with masculine and feminine 'souls' at the same time. It is in and through the procreative organs of the body that these souls demonstrate themselves. Therefore, in case of a man, the female soul lies in the prepuce while for a woman, the masculine soul lies in the clitoris. The boy, on growing up, has to shed his feminine feature through the removal of the prepuce. The same goes for the girl who, before reaching puberty, has to give up her clitoris and at times both clitoris and labia. It is only then that she is entitled to be a complete woman capable of good sex. The idea of making a woman 'complete' refers to the belief that she is incomplete. Moreover, the male and the female circumcision are entirely different—both physically and symbolically. Male circumcision is the removal of prepuce which is a highly dispensable piece of skin attached to the penis. Female excision, on the contrary, is the removal of a vital part or parts away from the female genitalia. This dispensable nature of the prepuce and its relation to the female soul reflects the dispensability of the female self. Similarly, the clitoris, being a vital organ and repository of the masculine soul, gives intense pain upon being removed and an irreparable sense of loss. This is what can be seen in case of Firdaus who, as mentioned earlier, loses the erotic pleasure after her excision. In fact, she knows that she has lost something really essential (the masculine soul) which is also the repository of pleasure. A boy, on the other hand, does not experience any such feelings upon the loss of prepuce (the feminine soul).

Firdaus, on being stripped of her clitoris, appears to be making up for it for the rest of her life. It is not only her clitoris but her entire corporeal being which is later on taken away from her and given to Sheikh Mahmoud in the name of marriage who beats, fondles and nearly rapes her countless times. Both her excision during the childhood and marriage on growing up tell her that she cannot take charge of her body. It is rather the patriarchal order of the society which is the master of her body. Firdaus simply rejects this rule and struggles to make up for the loss of this control. She tends to achieve this through prostitution. As per the conventional patriarchal view, prostitution is associated with women who do not have control over their bodies. This long-standing belief is nevertheless challenged by Firdaus, as she turns down whoever she wants and chooses the clients who she deems worthy.

Firdaus' excision results in one more loss. In addition to the loss of feelings, she is also made to suffer from the loss of speech. This is what is suggested by

Cixous (419) who asserts that censoring the female body means the censoring of breath and speech at the same time. The removal of clitoris from Firdaus' body is thus an attempt to deprive her of the power of language—a power which is then handed over to patriarchy. For Schroeder, Firdaus not only embraces her body but also the suffering which comes along thus managing to remain whole and in possession of her discourse. By turning down those who she does not like, Firdaus proves that with the wholeness of the body comes the wholeness of the discourse.

With Marzouk, however, Firdaus experiences the worst feelings. It is as if she is once again castrated, though this time symbolically. He forcibly tries to be her pimp and tries to deprive her of her independence by controlling both her body and money. Thus, she is robbed both of her freedom of choice and that of speech. This enrages Firdaus to an extent that she kills Marzouk after which she asks herself why she never stabbed a man hitherto. Firdaus validates herself by resisting castration and preserving her freedom of choice and expression. The readers thus see Firdaus ending up in fearlessness. She embraces death as she comes to learn that there is nothing to be afraid of. Patriarchy did its job by taking Firdaus' body (clitoris) away from her. Firdaus, however, retorted by fighting for her memory, her body, and an emancipated speech. Mutilated, fragmented and dissected by phallogocentricity, Firdaus takes her revenge by beating down those who try to fill her with shame or silence. She rather makes them yield to what she desires and wills.

### **Conclusion**

El Saadawi's novella aims at resisting the widespread and erroneous notions regarding the woman question in the Egyptian metropolis. These notions feature her society in particular and the entire Arab-African world in general. There are various socio-political agencies and institutions (like tyrannical marriages and oppressive employment for women) that reinforce such misgivings. Women like Firdaus, her mother, and Sherifa are the typical victims in El Saadawi's fictional world who, at the same time, also hold a mirror up to their society. These characters present the sorry picture of the Arab-African cultural milieu where women are oppressed, subjugated and reduced to the subhuman level in the name of culture, politics, economy, and religion. El Saadawi's way is to bring forth all the bad practices which account for female suffering for centuries and which still exist to date. To her, the backwardness of women leads to the cumulative backwardness of an entire society.

El Saadawi debunks various myths that justify patriarchy. Such myths, as mentioned earlier, are embedded in many of our cultural institutions like marriage

or female circumcision. On top of this, men use violent means to obtain and then sustain their supremacy over women, who are then forced to adhere to the prevailing code of social conduct. On the political, social, and religious plane of El Saadawi's world, women are always disadvantaged and marginalized. This gives birth to characters like Firdaus who, in search of safety and shelter, leave the misogynist household of their husbands. Firdaus' becoming a prostitute or public property is the direct result of the denial of a sense of self or a stable identity—a phenomenon which El Saadawi's female characters go through. El Saadawi, therefore, does not hesitate to present gender as a model which accounts for the misery and subordination of women in her world. Her narrative is overtly bold and visibly vocal against the norms based on realities that shape the lives, situations and day-to-day experiences of her characters.

El Saadawi's Firdaus, in the course of her narrative, demonstrates what happens when a woman is tyrannized privately and publicly. One, at this point, may safely assume that Firdaus could have been a far better human being, with an innate sensitivity and a high level of intelligence (which she demonstrates at school), if she were not subjected to the misery at the hands of various men around her. It seems as if the entire social order is in conspiracy with patriarchy both of which mutually work out female subordination. El Saadawi, through her female protagonist and spokesperson (Firdaus), openly challenges normativity which is nothing but a socially-conditioned manipulation working in favor of men and standing antithetical to women.

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