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DISCOURSE OF THE LADEN: BAWDRY AS A DELEGATING CHOICE OF LIVING IN
NAWAL EL- SAADAWI'S 'WOMAN AT POINT ZERO'

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Abstract

Many feminist writers and critics consider female prostitution as a resistance strategy against patriarchal values and as a means of self exploration and emancipation from the clutches of male chauvinism. It gives them an opportunity to move from the position of an all pervading passive sex objects designed for men's sexual pleasures to the position of agency and subjectivity that enable them to express their sexuality and use their femininity as a revolt against sexual and economic exploitation. This paper entitled "Discourse of the Laden: Bawdry as a Delegating Choice of Living in Nawal El- Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*" is an attempt to explore the how the body politics operates in redefining the womanhood of a third world sexed subaltern through the work of Nawal El- Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*.

Keywords: Body politics, feminism, sexed subaltern, prostitution, exploration

Review

The various oppressive stipulations that women confront within the Middle East such as domestic violence, sexual abuse, female genital mutilation, child-marriage, bride-burning, discrimination in religious institutions and work place and other harmful cultural practices stands as an obstacle in the personal development of women in the society. Nawal El Saadawi's portraiture of this grim reality in *Woman at Point Zero* brings forth the various phases of injustices and abuse that women grapple with in phallogocentric societies. Saadawi's research on women political prisoners, published as *Women and Neurosis in Egypt* in 1976, is a testament of the 'emotional nuances' of Egyptian women's lives. Her writing of *Woman at Point Zero*, on the other hand, recounts a woman's individual story, described by Saadawi herself as half way between fiction and fact. Saadawi through her protagonist Firdaus, lashes out all the discriminations endured by women in a phallogocentric society. She brings forth how the female body which was considered only as an object to satiate the sexual urges of men act as weapon for defining her identity and empowerment. Though the morality which was written by men were prevalent in

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the mainstream how these morality ensnares the patriarchy is well plotted in this novel.

The post colonial third world writing of the oppressed has its own way of self expression. It would be a herculean task to bring forth the expressions of the third world women. These writings in general, mirrors the pitiable plight of women as the oppressed, the other, a body and as the marginalized devoid of power to articulate their thoughts and desires. The novel, *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El-Saadawi, one of the prominent figures in Egyptian feminism, stands as a text of women's polyvalent experiences that expose the problems faced by women of the Middle East which represents the heterogeneity of third world women's experience. Through this text the author attempts to give voice for the oppressed strata. It is worth mentioning that the voice of the lower class women intentionally dominates or managed to find space through this text. Saadawi's writings procure a space in the emancipation of the third world women as they were banned for eleven years under Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, her books were censored in Jordan, Libya, and Saudi Arabia, and eventually she was imprisoned by Sadat for speaking against male domination in Egypt.

Simone de Beauvoir encapsulated an argument in her classic analysis of women, *The Second Sex* which triggered the onset of modern feminism that: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (273). Contemporary feminist theory has

consistently argued that female sexuality has always been ostracized as mysterious or insignificant and that such representations of women's sexuality, desire and fantasies have all been a social construct which in fact is male dominated. Since female sexuality was mystified, objectified and commercialized in a phallogocentric set up, feminists advocated a feministic perspective at it and established an autonomous right of women to own their bodies as they are."The female body", according to Jasbir Jain "is controlled by patriarchal morality, and by the roles of wifehood and motherhood. Thus any attempt to seek selfhood or project subjectivity, or to work towards self-expression and freedom, has to work through the body" (119).

Woman at Point Zero opens with the portrayal of an author, a woman psychologist, who is engaged in an attempt to pull out the mysterious background of one of her patients Firdaus, a captive who anticipates death sentence at Qanatir prison. Firdaus, an enigmatic ex-prostitute seems to be an introvert and hates the company of people as she paid little attention in speaking with her inmates. The decision of Firdaus to articulate the roller coaster ride of her life after a long compulsion from the psychologist, took the novel to another level which was in fact a mirror held up to the plight of a sexed subaltern .

Let me speak. Do not interrupt me. I have no time to listen to you. They are

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coming to take me at six o'clock this evening. I shall no longer be here. Nor will I be in any place known to man. This journey to a place unknown to everybody on this earth fills me with pride. All my life I have been searching for something that would fill me with pride, make me feel superior to everyone else, including kings, princes and rulers(9).

The text can be considered as a feminine reading of social, economic, and political factors that reflect women's oppression within Egyptian society, prostitution and the challenges in understanding the conditions of women's lives in the third world. These conditions subvert her position of privilege within the existing relations of power and gender politics. The protagonist of the novel was exposed to all sorts of marginalization such as abuse, oppression and abandonment, being taken advantage of on all levels, and of consistent rejection, all through her life, by nearly every human she encountered from childhood to adulthood. In the society the figure of the female prostitute signifies the 'other' not only because of her gender but also of her dignity as a wretched creature destined to be used by the phallogocentric society which is analogous to the nation prostituted to the colonizer for superficial gains, bands of gold, and the false beauties of Western modernization.

Nawal challenges the tradition of Arab literature that has failed to give women a voice and a space for her in the society, where her "self" is dislocated in patriarchal discourse by giving voice to Firdaus, who is imprisoned for murdering a pimp. The protagonist Firdaus' life germinated from a daughter passing to a wife, to a prostitute, to an office employee, and finally back to a prostitute. Right from the childhood she confronts the abuse just because of her gender where she is molested by her own uncle; as a married woman, her femininity is insulted by her husband. As an office worker, she does not make enough money to maintain the privileged standard of living she had as a prostitute. During her initial months as a prostitute, her pimp takes advantage of her; it is not until Firdaus strikes out on her own that she finds any degree of freedom, agency, and self-worth. When Firdaus was a child, because of her birth as a female child she was denied food while her father ate a full dinner; when she was married, her miserly husband complained if he thought she ate too much. A metamorphosis happened to her life when she became a prostitute where she could enjoy all the luxuries and rights of a human being just like the so called "absolute men." She considered the prostitution as a means of attaining freedom from a phallogocentric society. By the end of the text, Firdaus comes to the conclusion that Egyptian women are oppressed no matter what they do. She asserts that "All women are prostitutes of one kind or another" (91).

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They sell themselves to husbands for food and shelter; unmarried women often “sell” themselves sexually for promotions or getting promotions at their jobs. In a system where she felt she had no freedom and was subservient to men, active prostitution gave her the most liberty and agency possible.

Even though Firdaus says that prostitution gave her freedom, she hated the circumstances which forced her to be a prostitute. But she concluded that, in a culture where women being taken advantage at every turn, prostitution gave an opportunity for her to explore her buried identity and her thirst for freedom. Her first experiences of independence as a prostitute give her a newfound sense of self, causing her to associate prostitution with liberty and control over herself. By viewing prostitution as an empowering choice of living, Firdaus becomes blind to the faults of her actions and the fact that by offering herself to men for a price in turn lowers herself and allows men to have authority over her. As an oppressed woman in the Middle East, Firdaus has an ingrained desire to try to reach the social status men hold in society. The obvious difference in standings between the genders, as highlighted by her history of men abusing her, can be viewed as her main motivation to regain the control over the means of production of her own body that was taken away by the men. She says:

A woman’s life is always miserable. A prostitute,

however, is a little better off . . . The fact that I rejected [men’s] noble attempts to save me, my insistence on remaining a prostitute, proved to me this was my choice and I had some freedom, at least the freedom to live in a situation better than that of other women (97).

Firdaus uses prostitution as a strategy for exploring her lost and forgotten freedom rather than enslaving herself. To say that sex work rendered her subservient to men does not truly hold up when she had already endured a clitoridectomy, sexual abuse, and a forced marriage. Prostitution does not render her more enslaved in fact, it gives her the freedom she craved. Clitoridectomy, also known as Female Genital Mutilation, is a common practice in many traditional African societies. It is a traditional practice in which a person, sometimes unskilled or a health worker, cuts off parts or whole organs of the female genitalia usually using the knife or razor blade, which for the most part is unsterilized...It is considered, variously, a cleansing ritual from evil spirits, a female rite of passage, a guarantor of a woman’s chastity and her marriage ability, and a boost to fertility or to a man’s sexual pleasure (Salami 37). It is terrible to know that this practice is carried out by elderly women who have gone through the same painful exercise that is enforced by

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traditional customs and they know the devastating effect of this mutilation. The woman is mutilated both physically and psychologically.

The notion that the girl-child, who is destined to be a subservient wife or an obedient daughter is denied her right of education by her parents. It is at the tender age of eighteen, Firdaus is forcefully married off to Sheik Mahmoud, a sixty-year old rich widower, by her uncle. He is sixty and has a facial deformity. At first Firdaus runs away, but while she is on the streets, she is terrified by the strange men who approach her, so she returns home. Thus she was married off to Sheikh Mahmoud. Simone de Beauvoir writes, a woman's "sex condemns her to a mutilated and fixed existence" as a mother and wife. Women in the novel are treated similarly to de Beauvoir's description of the 'second sex' (326). The men in Firdaus's society sets themselves up as the 'Subject, he is the Absolute', while the women as 'the other'. Mahmoud a male chauvinist considered her as a commodity befitting her to be treated like an animal which compelled her to run away. Firdaus chooses this route and becomes a prostitute herself, following a series of depressing episodes with the men in her life. She ends up in a coffee shop, where she meets Bayoumi, the coffee shop owner, who in turn leads her to prostitution. Firdaus escapes with the help of a neighbour and flees Bayoumi's apartment for the city.

All women are victims of deception. Men impose deception on women and punish them for being deceived, force them down to the lowest level and punish them for falling so low, bind them in marriage and then chastise them with menial service for life, or insults, or blows (94).

Resting by the Nile, Firdaus feels hopeless until a wealthy-looking prostitute, Sharifa approaches her. She takes Firdaus in and teaches her to become a high-class prostitute. As a prostitute, Firdaus describes her body in correspondence to the eyes of the people in her life, with more detachment of feeling than she did prior to becoming a prostitute. Sharifa makes money from Firdaus's body until one night when her friend Fawzy comes over. Firdaus overhears Sharifa and Fawzy fighting over who will get to keep her, so she runs away again. The body of woman depicts many metaphorical meanings in the novel, especially the eyes. Firdaus's eyes depict the lack of control that she has over her life, which are heightened by the descriptions of the moments of when she is prostituting herself. Firdaus also uses her eyes as a way to form social bonds with other people.

Still a prostitute, Firdaus becomes her own boss and eventually owns a beautiful home and expensive things. One night, one of her clients named Di'aa made a

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comment that a whore is always treated as an alien in the society lead her to give up her immoral way of living and she gives up her nice apartment and beautiful things, moves into a shack, and begins working as an office assistant. There, she realizes that the life of an assistant is in many ways worse than the life of a prostitute. Saadawi says in an interview given to 'Race and Class' Journal:

There are two conflicts. Under the feudal system a woman's labour is under the control of the man and under capitalism she is under the control of the factory owner. Third World women are caught between these two oppressions and the contradictions which are thrown up. In the view of these double oppressions and contradictions we cannot take a middle class position when we begin to discuss the position of Third World women. Because the nature of the oppression of every Third World woman, she carries within her the seeds of a working-class consciousness (181)

Later Firdaus meets a man named Ibrahim, and falls in love with him. They have a relationship, and Firdaus begins to feel that the world is not so horrible, until

she discovers that Ibrahim has become engaged to the boss's daughter. Firdaus leaves the company and becomes a prostitute again. She became very expensive and very popular then. Many powerful men come to her, and she turns some of them away to prove that she has power over her own body, and because she despises them.

Yet not for a single moment did I have any doubts about my own integrity and honour as a woman. 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 (99).

Ibrahim comes to her again, and she realizes he never loved her; rather, he just wanted free sex. A pimp tries to take over Firdaus's life, and for a little while, she lets him. Then they fight and she kills him. Shortly after that, Firdaus meets an Arab prince who takes her home and offers her \$3,000. She sleeps with him, rips up the money, and slaps him. Terrified, the man calls the police. They came and arrest Firdaus. Firdaus is tried and sentenced to death. She is, she tells Nawal, just waiting to die, because she is excited to go somewhere new. She knows that the men who sentenced her want to kill her because they're afraid of the truth she has to tell, not because they're afraid she'll kill again. Physically and verbally battered, Firdaus retains nonetheless her capacity for agency, which

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manifests itself in a rage that culminates in the scene of the murder. This is a cathartic moment that helps her realize that anger sets her free to re appropriate language, to face “the savage, primitive truths” (51) and to be beyond fear and death. Firdaus finally names herself: she refuses to be a victim, and is willing to be a criminal because she prefers, as she puts it “to die for a crime I have committed rather than to die for one of the crimes you have committed.” (52)

Once she finishes her story, police come to her cell and took her away to be executed. The author leaves the cell and is ashamed of the unscrupulous world contaminated by lies and treacheries. When Saadawi braids her identity with that of Firdaus because of their shared experience of pain and betrayal, she gives us a powerful example of a kind of feminine textuality. I have called message, a dialogical hybrid that fuses together heterogeneous elements. (55) We are here in the presence of a mutual and reciprocal “naming” which effaces differences in order to point to an essential truth: that beyond their social differences, the two women share a nominal essence qua excised women. (56) Since this sexual mutilation is the most important cultural signifier of femininity, “biological” femininity becomes a culturally determined fact, linked to specific local practices.

It is when she murders her pimp that Firdaus is finally able to stand up for herself and truly fight for her self-control, saying, “I don’t want to be anybody’s slave.” (103)

This final act is her rebellion against the politics in which men rule over women and relates to the struggle of mankind for control. Therefore, Harlow’s claim that resistance and the fight for liberation does not deal with gender is false; Firdaus’ constant struggle for control throughout the novel that eventually leads her to murder is very much based on gender roles. Firdaus’ eventual acquirement of self-control causes her to be imprisoned and executed for her self-defense in the struggle for her authority against a man.

The subjugation of women is a plague that cuts across African societies. This social evil of marginalization that cuts across an entire continent calls for a concerted effort from women around the world to join hands together and fight for their liberation. Since suffering is a common denominator that they share together, they need to unite and see to its stoppage. Firdaus eventually succeeds in protesting against society and making her voice heard of all of the injustices that are present within it. She faces the ultimate consequence for it, but nevertheless demonstrates the ability of women to deracinate conventional social order. The descriptions Firdaus gives of the many deceiving or controlling eyes in the novel prove that she was not able to affiliate with these other characters. In contrast, the affiliation that is formed with the psychiatrist in the end of the novel allows Firdaus to battle for freedom from the oppressive forces that plague her society.

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Woman at Point Zero exemplifies the possibility of resistance to hegemonic pressures and to the cultural master narrative. It is emblematic of the issues raised by Gayatri Spivak in her essay “Can the Subaltern speak” which discusses the problem of the voiceless other, the question of objective truth, and the name of the other ‘woman’. Saadawi’s work can be used as an example of the self-reflexive questioning that can make feminist criticism sensitive to the way scholarly discourse names “the other woman” and appropriates her voice, while at the same time insisting on the need for a universalist perspective on the global condition of oppression of women. The association between the educated researcher and the “un common criminal” changes the terms of the equation between “self” and “other” or “subjective” and “objective,” enacting a transfer of values and feelings, locating the practice of writing at the intersection of multiple forms of knowledge. Saadawi’s text contrasts and collapses the language of patriarchy and the language of the body, bringing into focus those aspects of the narrative that allow for its re-definition as a self-portrait. By appropriating Firdaus’s voice and allowing inter subjective communication to occur between them, Saadawi raises the hope that it is possible to come to an acceptable compromise regarding interpretation and intervention in the local practices of African Islamic societies. If autobiography or life narrative is the means by which African women represent themselves, then to understand their subjective experience of excision, and

its affective and cultural ramifications, we need to look for traces of these preoccupations in their texts, and to listen to their silence. In her Author’s Preface, Saadawi states:

Firdaus is the story of a woman driven by despair to the darkest of ends. This woman, despite her misery and despair, evoked in all those who, like me, witnessed the final moments of life, a need to challenge and to overcome those forces that deprive human beings of their right to live, to love and to real freedom (5).

Although Saadawi is emphasizing women issues, especially basic rights of women to survive, these could hardly be taken for granted in Sadat’s Egypt. What makes the story compelling is the highly personal tone, the erosion of distance between the authorial self and the first person narration of Firdaus. Indeed, if Saadawi is first drawn to Firdaus because of her exceptional nature, the focus soon shifts to their shared experience of oppression as women in a patriarchal culture. What the text puts in motion is a strategy of displacement and identification between two women who are “objectively” very different from the point of view of their respective social classes, their education and profession but whose intimate experiences as women are uncannily similar. The narrative suggests

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that the universal can only be known through the particular or the personal, that it is the concrete subjective experience of this 'other woman' that allows the narrator to relate to her as woman and sister, to give her voice and to make her eternal through her writing.

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