

On the Back of Culture and Religion: The Oppression of Arab Women in Nawal El Saadawi's *Women at Point Zero*

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Abstract

Nawal El Saadawi's *Women At Point Zero* points eerily at the reality that in the Arab world which Egypt represents in the text, a trifecta of sex, religion and death forms the core of women oppression as espoused through the tragically unfortunate life of Firdaus, the novel's major protagonist. This paper is therefore unequivocal in stating that the Arab world -through the canvas of Egypt- in the Saadawian text is a space for the pervasive oppression of women. The condition and oppression of women in the Arab world can be located within a toxic mix of culture and religion which has engendered virulent misogynistic attitudes towards women in general. In this light, the paper embraces Feminism especially its radical strand as the most potent option available to any woman living in a fundamentally hostile space as the Arab world, where misogynistic attitudes are constructed deliberately by men's contempt for women on the back of culture and religion.

Introduction

Nawal El Saadawi is one of the first Arab female writers to gain the attention of a global reading audience not only because of her feminist temper, but also because of her avowed willingness to take on a conservative Arab society (in this case Egypt) that is heavily influenced by culture and religion. Arguably, she is not the only prominent writer/activist for the rights of Arab women; however, she is the most prolific Arab female writer of the contemporary age with many literary works under her belt, including *Woman At Point Zero* and *The Circling Song*. What becomes immediately apparent to any reader of her novels especially *Woman At Point Zero* (which is the focus of this paper) is El Saadawi's concern with such issues as the socio-economic exploitation and oppression of women, the sexual exploitation of women and the intermingling of religion and culture in the domination of women by men in the Egyptian society.

To write on any work of El Saadawi without a peep into her background is to miss an important link in connecting who she is and how and why she has come to represent what she

does. She was born in an Egyptian village along the River Nile and at the age of six, and at the insistence of her mother, El Saadawi underwent a clitoridectomy (part of a web of traditional practices known as female genital mutilation, FGM); a painful procedure practiced in many parts of Africa and the Arab world, in which a girl's clitoris is surgically removed for socio-cultural and religious reasons. 'Unusually' sent to school in a conservative Muslim environment where the child girl is classified as a second class 'Other' right from birth and where everything is done to make her remain so, El Saadawi becomes a medical doctor against the odds arranged against her from birth. After two failed marriages that ended in divorce, she is presently married to her third husband; a novelist and medical doctor like her.

From this point, we can rightly assume that for any scholar, locating the reasons why El Saadawi stands where she has consistently done on the issue of women's rights as well as her feminist disposition is not farfetched; her life personifies the struggles and experiences of women in many Arab societies. As a kind of rebellious non-conformist in a conformist and conservative society, the journey has not been an easy one for her. El Saadawi's 'rebellious' writings on women's oppression and exploitation in a cultural and religious-inclined society have elicited criticisms from many who view her from the prism of a stubborn troublemaker, who achieves fame by taking side with westerners in their prejudices against the Arabo-Islamic culture. Such critics of El Sadaawi according to Amal Amireh (1996:npn) hold that "The West welcomes her (*El Saadawi's*) feminist critique of Arab culture because it confirms the existing stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims as backward, misogynist and violently oppressive" (not in the original). These criticisms of El Saadawi's efforts to expose the oppression of women in these societies can be further located in these societies' reactionary tendencies to such epochs as colonialism, neocolonialism and westernisation. She is not alone in this regard. The activist writer, Mona Eltahawy (also Egyptian) shares her own experience of being accused of washing the dirty linen in the public place in her book, *Headscarves and Hymens: Why The Middle East Needs A Sexual Revolution*.

Writers and activists such as El Saadawi are viewed as prodigal children who reject cultural nationalism, but prefer and insist on washing dirty cultural linen before the preying eyes of the public especially the western world. The classification of the likes of El Saadawi as prodigal children is because "... in the Middle East, nationalism and feminism have never mixed very well" (Accad, 1991:238). Often times, such conservative societies are unforgiving of stray subjects like El Saadawi who stubbornly decide to share insider information with outsider hence they accuse them of possessing a colonial mentality; one which allegedly pushes them to want to please the West and import western ideas of freedom into these societies. In an understanding of this dilemma and writing on behalf of feminist writers like El Saadawi, Uma Narayan (1997:5) seems to underscore why this is so for many of them:

Many ... feminists confront the attitude that our criticisms of our cultures are merely one more incarnation of a colonized consciousness, the views of "privileged native women in whiteface," seeking to attack their "non-Western culture" on the basis of Western values.

These Western values, often purposely demonised in these societies by advocates and supporters of conservative ideas and oppressive cultural concepts, are those consistently desired by human beings everywhere: that is, the values of freedom, determinism, libertarianism and egalitarianism

Interestingly, a careful assessment of El Saadawi's personality suggests that any attempt to cast her in the image of a pro-West native woman does not hold water and should be summarily dismissed. According to Amireh (1996), such criticisms of El Sadaawi come from male critics hostile to her feminism, and also do not hold water in the face of her sharp and stringent criticisms of the West, especially her virulent attack of the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, which she labels "real terrorism". We also disagree with any assessment of El Saadawi's writings and stance as being slavishly pro-West because it is obviously so unfair, uncharitable and subjective. We are of the opinion that her writings' fixation on the veil, the harem, FGM and polygamy cannot be reduced to western stereotyping of the Arabo-Islamic culture alone, rather because they far more imperatively constitute a transparent image of a socio-cultural environment where the male gender is favoured and empowered to treat the female gender as mere appendage. A space where in the words of Eltahawy (2015:17), women are sexually assaulted "to remind us that public space is male prerogative." It is in this light that we hold that the twin issues of sexuality and oppression take centre stage in a novel like *Woman At Point Zero* because the Arabo-Muslim culture is heavily patriarchal by nature and practice. Within the walls of this culture, "... sexuality and privatized oppression of women by men are relegated ..." (Accad, 1991:238) to the background of discursive engagements, therefore the Saadawian exposé of her society where patriarchy is an all-inclusive system that constructs social, political, cultural and religious structures central to the oppression of women is a timely and justifiable intervention.

Feminists readily argue that gender is socially constructed, and as a result of this, the roles women play in the society are determined for them and for all, by a patriarchal world order. In a bid to situate this assertion within the context of "who is a feminist? Who is a female? What is being feminine?", Barry (1995:122) posits that: "As Torii Moi explains, the first is a 'political position', the second 'a matter of biology', and the third 'a set of culturally defined characteristics'." Generally speaking, women, led by a contemporary writer like El Saadawi, according to M.E.M Kolawole (1997:6) have "emerged from "silence" transcending the many limiting borders imposed on them by patriarchal-traditional and post-colonial structures" and have found their voices and are telling their own stories of oppression, exploitation and victimisation in the hands of men. These women writers are rejecting the self/author censorship which traditional societies unwittingly impose on them. That El Saadawi is a feminist is not in doubt, but what cannot be safely gauged is if her writings can be pigeonholed within only one strand of feminism. This dilemma emerges as the reader is faced with the reality that she oscillates between Marxist-Feminism and Radical Feminism in *Woman At Point Zero*, in which she tells the compelling but tragic story of Firdaus, a prostitute condemned to death for the murder of her own pimp.

***Women At Point Zero*. Making the link between two strands of Feminism**

Feminism both as a theory and movement has made the condition of the female sex its priority. Since its emergence however, it has mutated into several strands in order to accommodate the multiplicity of voices coming from deep inside its bowels and also the complexities of the female condition across cultures, race and temperament. Like a market place of idea, many roads now lead to feminism but all these roads (manifesting in the different strands) are connected to the base and each other in different ways. Two strands of feminism, Marxist feminism and radical feminism are prominently accommodated in El Saadawi's *Woman At Point Zero*. As a marxist feminist, El Saadawi does not see the possibility of isolating gender from class. Women, she makes vividly clear in *Women At Point Zero*, dine at the altar of oppression as members of the lower class (Fedwa Malti-Douglas, 1995). Even after Firdaus quits her marriage and emerges as an affluent prostitute, she is not accepted into the upper class as she is still confined to the lower class segment of the Egyptian society. El Saadawi portrays this because according to Kolawole (1997:12), "Marxist feminists maintain that gender justice is not possible while class stratification is not eliminated". However, El Saadawi uses the relationship between the doctor and the condemned prostitute in the text to grandstand as a marxist feminist, by portraying a relationship that transcends class boundaries. As a feminist, she is of the school of thought that believes that religion is organised and interpreted by patriarchy to further subjugate the female gender. This Saadawian belief is taken a step further by Malti-Douglas (1995) who opines that in almost all Saadawian writings, religion as an institution is a multifaceted and complex enterprise much like patriarchy, of which it is a pivotal component and from which it draws much strength.

Religion penetrates deeply in the Saadawian society, affecting everyday realities. It encourages and authorises punishments against the female gender for any perceived infraction against the social norms of the society. Religion instructs the woman that "... to be obedient is a duty ... (p. 12). In *Woman At Point Zero*, wife beating is allowed in both religious and socio-cultural parlance in Egypt. The practice of wife beating is so endemic in the society that El Saadawi and the heroine of her novel, Firdaus give it prominence in the text: "... my uncle told me that all husbands beat their wives, and my uncle's wife added that her husband often beat her" (p. 44). Even though a predominantly Muslim society, no quranic citation is provided or needed for this act of wanton and unwarranted physical violence against women. Rather, justification for the act is anchored in religion: "It was precisely men well versed in their religion who beat their wives. The precepts of religion permitted such punishment" (p.44). By this extant reality, it becomes apparent that the female gender in Egypt in general suffers under the jackboots of religion and a culture of violence. In this sense, it becomes clear that abuses against women are "fueled by a toxic mix of culture and religion that few seem willing to disentangle lest they blaspheme or offend" (Eltahawy, 2015:5).

On another level, it can also be argued that El Saadawi is a radical feminist. As a writer and activist, her radical departure from the norm of her patriarchal society as well as the solutions she proffers and provides for women oppression in *Woman At Point Zero* point at her radical feminism leaning. To get a better understanding of the radical feminist point of view, the opinion of M.E.M Kolawole becomes quite instructive. According to Kolawole (1997:13):

Some issues that are central to radical feminism underscore the question of cultural relevance. The role of patriarchy as it undermines women's sexuality is dominant in radical feminist discourse. Many such scholars have proposed very overt demonstrations of sexuality and sexual freedom.

For a woman to escape the stiffening grip of the kind of patriarchy and male sexual domination espoused in *Woman At Point Zero*, El Saadawi suggests that she must take the radical route by taking her destiny in her own hands. Therefore any institution or person that stands as a symbol of oppression or on her path to self-assertion must be destroyed. Marriage is an institution that radical feminists believe further subjugates women, and that is why El Saadawi uses the characters of Firdaus and Sharifa to undermine it. Firdaus abandons her marriage, and helped by Sharifa, she takes to prostitution which gives her freedom over her life and choices. In the words of Sharifa, "Aman does not know a woman's value, Firdaus. She is the one who determines her own value" (p. 55, not in the original). This goes to show that to Sharifa (a champion of women liberation), prostitution is not only a way to make men value women, it is also an avenue to gain respect and live a life that is independent of men.

Radical feminism belongs in the second wave of feminism led by Shulamith Firestone which started in 1960s. It proposes for women the idea of sexual freedom and interrogates how sex roles perpetuate inequality and the classification of women as second class citizens. It identifies what has come to be known as 'the relationship of dominance' which privileges such concepts as marriage and other heterosexual relationships as private arenas where men oppress women to the maximum. Ellen Willis (1984) writes that the success of radical feminism is in questioning the so-called private arena i.e. marriage, sexual relationship and housework and its roles in privileging man as the superior sex. One of the most basic tenets of radical feminism is the total elimination of male supremacy in all economic (working and work place rights) and social (class distinction) contexts in order to free the innate potentials of women for their own good as well as the good of mankind. In El Saadawi's *Woman At Point Zero*, many of the core ideas which radical feminists support are reflected in the character of Firdaus and the tragic trajectory of her life.

Religious-Cultural Realities in *Woman At Point Zero*

The Egyptians like many Middle Easterners are notorious for the intensity of their religious beliefs and culture. Right from biblical time when Egypt was known as the centre of civilisation of the ancient world up till date under the influence of Islam, Egypt remains deeply religious and culturally influential. Unfortunately, the experiences of women in Egypt appear to be at the mercy of the society's culture of patriarchal loutishness and religion conquest, as they have to endure centuries of summary justice, unending economic oppression, distortion of their social and intimate lives, and unrelenting submission to male brutality, supremacy and sexual violence. Egyptian females/women are without doubt at the receiving end of the so called Egyptian religious and cultural civilisation. These realities, ugly as they appear to be especially for a somewhat overtly religious society, are given prominence in *Women At Point Zero*.

Firdaus under the yoke of religion and culture experiences a turbulent childhood. She witnesses the constant and consistent abuse of her mother in the hands of her father; a man who reveals himself to her as someone who knows "... how to beat his wife and make her bite the dust each night" (p. 12). She experiences various other acts of violence growing up, including a mysterious circumcision (FGM) imposed by culture and religion, and a twisted molestation by her own uncle:

... I would glimpse my uncle's hand moving slowly from behind the book he was reading to touch my leg. The next moment I could feel it traveling up my thigh with a cautious, stealthy, trembling movement. Every time there was the sound of a footstep at the entrance to our house, his hand would withdraw quickly (p. 14).

Firdaus faces rejection and betrayal by her lovers and a bitter exploitation by pimps who, with alacrity, take advantage of her disadvantaged status as a woman in Cairo, Egypt. Most ruthless is the persistent taunting and exploitation she suffers in the hand of men, women, law enforcement agents and the society as she struggles to live an adult life for which no one prepares her in the real sense, and for which she has been given no tool with which to cope. Throughout her life, she appears to be in a cesspit or a whirlwind of poverty, degradation, oppression, subjugation and discrimination from which all her efforts combined could not deliver her. Firdaus begins her story with a note of hostility and bitterness against men and against a society deep in the culture of violence and cruelty against women and against the helpless. This way she is able to reveal a society's persnickety about religion yet steeped in a culture of violence. She lives in the world of men, experience their cruelty and feel their betrayal disguised in the form of religion and culture:

Each time, I picked up a newspaper and found the picture of a man who was one of them, I would spit on it ... Anyone who saw me spitting on the picture might think I knew the particular man personally. But I did not...there is no woman who could possibly know all the men who get their pictures published in the newspapers ... However, all the men I did get to know, every single man of them, has filled me with but one desire: to lift my hand and bring it smashing down on his face. (p.11)

Firdaus is a helpless but angry woman who has resigned herself to fate and her admission that "...because I am a woman, I have never had the courage to lift my hand" (p. 11) points us towards this conclusion. Here, Firdaus infers that she has grown up to fear men and has been taught to be submissive to the patriarchal system no matter the degree of cruelty done to her. Totally condemned to a world of fear, unending struggles and several injustices, she devises the means of covering up in overtly expensive make up, jewellery and dresses: "I hid my fears under layers of make-up" (p. 11).

Privileging the culture of religiosity of the society in which she lives, Firdaus describes her father as a poor peasant farmer who could neither read nor write yet he is very religious. He is a man whose religiosity is equal to the length of his flowing *galabeya*. Her father will not miss his Friday pilgrimage to the mosque which sooner than later is turned to an assemblage who

take every word out of the Imam's mouth as the gospel truth: "Every Friday morning he would put on a clean galabeya and head for the mosque to attend weekly prayer ... I would watch them ... wipe their brows while all the time invoking Allah's name, calling upon his blessing...without...a moment's respite..." (p. 12-13). Firdaus' father belongs in the category of people who use religion and culture as tools to gain control over others and at the same time, to compensate for their negative economic condition. Their women are expected to be totally submissive as "... to be obedient is a duty ..." (p. 12), therefore anything contrary to obedience casts such women as deviant, wayward and rebellious. Such women are eventually condemned and ostracised from the society for the audacity of resistance.

El Saadawi portrays the combination of religion and culture in Egypt as a lethal weapon of oppression and exploitation of women. Firdaus represents how this lethal weapon can be used to good effect to control a person's life. Despite the desire to be educated and her acclaimed brilliance in school: "When the results of the final examination were announced, I was told that I had come out second in the school and seventh countryside" (p. 32), Firdaus is denied the opportunity of proceeding with her education and fulfilling her ambition in life. Patriarchy tells her that university education is the exclusive right of men and from it dividends, a woman is excluded in order to privilege her as an inferior entity and also deny her access to the libertarian values encoded in formal education: "What will you do in Cairo, Firdaus?" And, I would reply: 'I will go to El Azhar and study like you. Then he would laugh and explain that El-Azhar was only for men...' (16). Firdaus uncle's flippant admission that El Azhar University, Cairo is only for the education of men raises some questions in her young mind about her identity and place in the society. Confounded by her uncle's flippant but grave statement of fact, she begins to query: "Who was I? ... Was I going to spend my life sweeping the dung out from under the animals, carrying manure on my head, kneading dough, and baking bread?" (p. 16) or why is Al Azhar "an awesome world peopled only by men ..."? (p. 21). These questions are the reasons for denying the woman a seat at the forefront of formal educational pursuit. The men who operate the patriarchal system desire only that the woman stays in the background living in total submission and servitude. Instead of empowering her through formal education and help her to fulfill her dreams of becoming "a doctor, or an engineer, or a lawyer, or a judge (p. 25), her dreams are killed at the secondary education level and a selfish arrangement is made to barter young Firdaus off in marriage to a man old enough to be her grandfather:

... Sheikh Mahmoud, is a virtuous man. He has a big pension and no children, and he's been on his own since his wife died last year. If he marries Firdaus she will have a good life with him, and he can find in her an obedient wife, who will serve him and relieve his loneliness ... It is risky for her to continue without a husband (p. 36)

It is quite pathetic that while Firdaus' fate is being decided, no one bothers to consult her for a say in the matter. She is no better than a commodity to be sold off and she is offered no protection to safeguard her dreams; not even the society offers her one.

The pathetic story of Firdaus reveals that Egyptian society is steeped in the culture of deception. As a young girl growing up, Firdaus could see through the purdah and the turban of religion and cultural deception worn by most religious and community leaders in Egypt. What she has experienced first-hand about the pervasiveness of culture and religion of deception in the society, literature helps her to conceptualise from the pages of the books she stumbles on in the almost abandoned library of her Cairo secondary school:

I read about a ruler whose female servants and concubines were as numerous as his army ... A third...enjoyed wars, killing and torturing men. Another ruler loved food, money and hoarding riches without end ... one or other of these rulers...saxt with the congregation attending Friday morning prayers...I could see he was trying to deceive Allah in the same way as he deceived the people. (26-27).

Helped by her personal experiences of religious hypocrisy and what her constant reading habit has exposed her to, Firdaus is easily able to see through the lies and deceptions of men: "... I could tell at once that in their heart of hearts they feared not Allah ..." (p. 28).

The culture of child marriage is a pervasive one in the Egyptian society. This practice, as offensive to and oppressive of the female child as it appears, is common because it is culturally and religiously sanctioned. Firdaus' life is a sad commentary on the culture of early marriage as practiced in Egypt and most parts of the Arab world. In her case, it is her sophisticated uncle and his educated wife who are bargaining her out in a hurriedly arranged marriage to Sheikh Mahmoud; a man who is described as old, self-centred, stingy and violent: "You know he's a man who can argue for hours over five millimes, and kill himself over a piastre" (p. 37). He is also sickly and deformed, with a hole on his face that leaks a putrefying odour: "On his chin, below the lip, was a large swelling, with a hole in the middle" (p. 43). But why should this matter of the Sheikh's deformity matter to an orphaned, low class girl like Firdaus who "has inherited nothing, and has no income of her own"? (p. 37) It is simply taken for granted that her uncle and his wife are doing her a really big favour by marrying her off at a young age while neglecting her utmost heart desire; though it is soon revealed that aside the plan to unburdened themselves of the excess baggage which Firdaus suddenly becomes after her secondary education, trading her off in marriage would allow the couple some sort of succour from financial stress: "If he (Sheikh Mahmoud) accepts to pay one hundred pounds that will be sufficient blessing from Allah. I will be able to pay my debts and buy some underwear ..." (37). This very horrible and despicable scenario could be brazenly so because of the conspiracy of religion and culture in the oppression of women in Egyptian society. How could anyone possibly complain about such a practice if God approves of it and the people love it and benefit from it? Those who complain about this practice are classified as iconoclasts who only want to undermine the well being of the society as enforced by culture and religion.

Women At Point Zero in vivid canvas also paints a picture of the culture of male chauvinism in the society. Culturally and religious wise, women in Egypt as with almost all Arab societies are believed to exist solely for the pleasure of men; feminism has always challenged this notion which it has equally traced to religious philosophies. From time immemorial, the female body has

faced extant cases of repression wrapped in the cloths of religion and culture. Underscoring this argument, Habib (2008:134) writes that “The most blatant cases of such repression of the body occur in theologies which advocate negation or denial of one’s body and its drives and desires, and in particular the female body, which is regarded as a source of temptation and often as unclean ...” However, the theological fraud has always been that while men have unrestrained access to and the enjoyment of sex and sexual pleasure, women are expected to have some form of inhibition even in sexual activities in marriage. In fact, the idea of FGM whose form, clitoridectomy Firdaus undergoes in the novel is premised on the need to control the sexuality of a woman for her own good (Kenyatta, 1965), and also to ensure and enforce the chastity of women generally, all in the name of traditional and religious prescriptions. In Egypt as it is with most societies where FGM practices are prevalent, it is generally believed that the clitoris allows women to achieve some form of sexual pleasure and expression, hence the need to clip the clitoris. So, Firdaus’ mother allows for a clitoridectomy (which is the excision of the clitoris) to be performed on her in order to conform to a prevalent socio-religious norm. Pointing the reader’s attention to this grave act, Firdaus tells us about how her own mother “... brought a woman who was carrying a small knife or maybe a razor blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from between my thighs” (p. 13). This again like most things done to her is without her consent. Her sexuality is violently assaulted and violated in conformity to culture; culture thus becomes an excuse for abuse.

At this juncture, one may begin to wonder what sort of life a woman in Egypt is meant to live in the face of the odds placed before her by the forces of culture and religion. Thus it can be safely argued that women exist totally for the pleasure of men. Women in Egypt are expected to deny themselves and their children necessary nourishment just to feed their men who hold the sole franchise to provide for the family. The woman is by convention expected to remain absolutely quiet and submissive at home. It is her sacred religious duty to be obedient to her husband. She must not be heard nor seen in the public as she remains hidden behind the veil at all times, not minding how conducive such an arrangement is for her physically and emotionally. Hidden away in the cloak of religion, a woman in Egypt has no face and no identity. She lives on the margin of society while her existence is at the discretion of the men in her life; starting from cradle with her own father, brothers or male cousins, uncles and ultimately her husband when she marries. The height of cruelty which the woman suffers in this society is to notice how the men have conspired to deny her those basic rights they enjoy in their own right for a set of completely selfish reasons built on the foundations of culture and religion. It is imperative to state that *Woman At Point Zero* and the life of Firdaus lend credence to Accad’s (1991:239) argument on the “centrality of sexuality and male domination to the political and national struggles occurring in the Middle East” of which Egypt, the setting of the novel is a credible example. Men not only dominate the society, they equally appropriate women’s sexuality for their own selfish agenda and enjoyment in a way detrimental to the well being of women.

Aside the odds against women like Firdaus in Egypt, they also suffer betrayal in the hands of those men whom they love. Her uncle who she loves with her whole being conspires with his wife to trade her off in an arranged marriage. Firdaus soon realises of men that: “They’re all the

same, all sons of dogs, running around under various names” (p. 52). Firdaus is condemned to death for murdering her oppressor by the same system that turns her into a murderer. The same system that now pretends to have a form of holiness, decency, sanctity and respect for human life has contributed in no small measure to pushing her down the slope of destruction. That system, under the guise of religion, now seeks to get rid of Firdaus from the streets of Cairo like one gets rid of pests. Yet, it is the same system that fills her bed with illicit sex as a means of survival, accompany her on the nights she sells her body in exchange for money, pushes her to a point of no return and then turns around to condemn her for even trying to survive. It is quite ironic that a self professing and pronouncing religious country like Egypt has a thriving business for the scarlet ladies. It is a society living in a lie.

Prostitution is another layer of male domination and oppression of women. Radical feminism holds that it is a contrived means invented by men to appropriate women for their own pleasure as well as for economic gains. Firdaus slams Egyptian men for the indecent way they generally treat their women. For her, there is no distinction between the woman in the street (prostitute) and the one inside the home (wife). The woman at home is not better than the one parading the streets; because Egyptian men basically treat all women in the same condescending way:

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 forced women to sell their bodies at a price, and that the lowest paid body is that of a wife. All women are prostitutes of one kind or another (p. 91).

As a victim of the oppressive system put in place by an oppressive societal order, with time and also with a combination of the perspectives given her by her experiences, Firdaus is able to challenge the status quo imposed on her by culture and religion, that “Women are not to be seen or heard; even their voices are a temptation (Eltahawy 2015:17). She is willing to question and stand up against traditional values such as marriage, submissiveness and the culture of feminine seclusion and above all, the wall of deception which men have built around women to control them. The realisation does not come on a platter of gold; it comes with its attendant pain and complications:

Now I was aware of the reality, of the truth. Now I knew what I wanted. Now there was no room for illusions. A successful prostitute was better than a misled saint. All women are victims of deception. Men impose deception on women and punish them for being deceived, force them to the lowest level and punish them for falling so low, bind them in marriage and then chastise them with menial services for life, or insults or blows. Now I realized that the least deluded of all women was the prostitute. That marriage was the system built on the most cruel suffering for women, (p. 86-87)

It is quite interesting that despite the general attitude of contempt for the prostitutes/prostitution, Firdaus finds herself better placed than the married or working class woman in the triangle of

male oppression: "... as a prostitute I had been looked upon with more respect and been valued more highly ..." (p. 75). The married woman is trapped by religion and culture within the oppressive boulder of marriage, an institution created to privilege men and perpetuate the enslavement of women, while the working class women is a victim of a male-dominated economic system which inferiorises her potentials and talents. Firdaus' position aligns with that of radical feminists who have argued that the institution of marriage is a prominent site of male domination and should therefore be undermined. On the other hand, it also aligns with Marxist feminists who see the connection between the exploitation of women at home and in the work place. The argument put forward by Marxist feminists is that in both places, the work and efforts women put in are not adequately compensated. Hence, Firdaus repudiates the exploitation of women on both fronts, preferring instead to own her body as a prostitute: "I came to realize that a female employee is more afraid of losing her job than a prostitute is of losing her life. An employee is scared of losing her job and becoming a prostitute because she does not understand that the prostitute's life is in fact better than hers." (p. 76)

Firdaus' recourse to prostitution is only a survival strategy. However, it also represents her deviant appropriation of an inalienable right to own her own body, a popular feminist tenet which many women subscribe to. Radical feminism in particular engages the male domination of women in prostitution and sympathises with women who go into prostitution, as it recognises that these women are often pushed to become prostitutes by poverty and through coercion. The idea of freedom from domination and the ownership of one's self have always resonated with women judging from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and the musings of Helene Cixous. Both women suggest that 'room' and/or 'body' is a metaphor for many ideas dear to women such as freedom, self and individuality; all of which Firdaus gives expression to: "My body is at least mine" (p. 93). The notion of the female 'body' according to Habib (2007) is crucial to understanding the predicament of women; no wonder Cixous, according to Habib (2007:135) reminds us that the body "can express the individuality of the self, inhabiting a determinate position in place, time, class, color, race, and religion. To write with the body is to refuse to annul these differences." Through prostitution, Firdaus is able to have a certain degree of freedom and also, control over her own body and no matter how small that control is it is significant; something she intends to enjoy while it lasts even though one of her customers, Di'aa attempts to deny her of any sense of respectability. He tells her: "You are not respectable". The irony in Di'aa's statement of masculine arrogance is lost on him, a patron of prostitutes. But the real question to be asked is 'who is not respectable; the prostitute or her patron?' All that matters to Firdaus is freedom. She is therefore unmoved by the antics of men generally, and those like Di'aa who look down on her because she refuses to do their biddings: "The fact that I rejected their noble attempts to save me my insistence on remaining a prostitute, proved to me this was my choice and that I had some freedom, at least the freedom to live in a situation better than that of other women" (p. 89).

The partiality of the world in which she lives soon dawns on Firdaus. The idea of total freedom for women as evinced by her and feminism is a mirage; something which occasionally appears to be within the grasp of the woman, only for it to flutter away in a sudden burst of flight.

In spite of repeated and spiritedly consistent efforts to be free, Firdaus finds herself being held back and down (at times) by men like her father, uncle, Sheikh Mahmoud, Bayoumi, Ibrahim and Marzouk. Soon enough, the painful realisation permeates Firdaus's being: "I realized 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" (p. 94). It is the deciding moment for Firdaus, a caged bird but one which desperately wants to leave the imprisonment of the cage and be totally free. With the benefit of a contemplative reaction, Firdaus decides to free herself from the hold which the men who have entered her life have on her. Hence she murders Marzouk, a vicious, violent and domineering pimp who makes it his duty to make her life a living hell; her body (her most treasured possession) his money-making machine; and who is a major stumbling block on her path to freedom. Confronting the policemen who arrest her, Firdaus feels no remorse for brutally killing her pimp as she launches attack on men calling all men criminals like Marzouk: "I am saying that you are criminals, all of you: the fathers, the uncles, the husbands, the pimps, the lawyers, the doctors, the journalists, and all men of all professions." (p. 100). How telling and instructive that Firdaus goes down issuing a morbid indictment of all men; a triumph of the feminist spirit.

Conclusion

El Saadawi's *Woman At Point Zero* is a text that has contributed greatly to Arab women's attempt at breaking the hegemony of a misogynistic order; one that reduces them to mere appendages of men. It questions the slavish and subservient roles which religion and culture (both exclusively ordered and dominated by men) have imposed on women and concludes that women would no longer accept the historical toga of 'second class citizen' men have woven for them. The novel suggests that as long as men continue in their endeavour to control women shall women strive harder, looking for the much desired space to live their lives as illustrated by Firdaus' quest to be free. And when women reach the limit of men oppression, they (like Firdaus) would be left with no better choice than to fight back in self defence. El Saadawi like Chimamanda Adichie in her novel, *Purple Hibiscus* in which another oppressed woman, Beatrice Achike slowly and methodically poisons Eugene her husband, presents murder as the only escape option left for the severely oppressed and traumatised woman. Apart from underscoring the radicality inherent in El Saadawi's option for women liberation, this panacea becomes unavoidable in the face of Charles Nnolim claim that the female sex will never stop suffering in the hands of the male sex. It is to Firdaus' credit that she makes a formidable last stand, one that reverberates and shakes the foundation of the society. She thus becomes a martyr who gives women the courage to no longer play the victim, but to fight back male oppression and domination. Firdaus, the heroine of El Saadawi's *Woman At Point Zero* goes down fighting with a satisfaction that her last act of deviance against the religion and culture of oppression is capable of frightening men to change their attitudes against women, and also energise women to rise against their oppressors: "I knew why they were so afraid of me. I was the only woman who had tom the mask away, and exposed the face of their ugly reality." (p. 100)

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