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The Subjugation of Bodies, Gender, and Biopolitics in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*

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Abstract:

The subject of patriarchal systems, especially in eastern societies, has attracted literary writers, activists, and politicians, because of its importance and direct effect on women. The present study examines the subjugation of women's bodies, gender roles, and biopolitics in one of Nawal El Saadawi's novels: *Woman at Point Zero* (WPZ). For accomplishing the aim of the study, the research has adopted Michel Foucault's theory of power relations as the theoretical framework. It, through the analysis, examines patriarchal structures in African and Middle Eastern societies and their role in strengthening male dominance and preserving the systemic oppression of women. Firdaus, the novel's protagonist, develops as a strong symbol of female suffering and resistance under a system of psychological, physical, and sexual control. The study discloses how internalized trauma and cultural conditioning lead to the unconscious submission of women. It further explains the impact of religious and cultural bases on deepening female oppression and provides vision on how modern theory, especially Foucauldian biopolitics, can critically engage with these systems of dominance.

Keywords: Michel Foucault, Biopolitics, Gender, Power, Woman at Point Zero, Nawal El Saadawi

1. Introduction:

Nawal El Saadawi was born in 1931 in Kafr Tahla, a village in Egypt. She was exposed to female genital mutilation when she was six. This issue has become a crucial point in her activism and writing. Regarding her life and career, she was a student in a school and later she entered the University of Cairo in 1949, where she joined the medical school. She earned her doctorate in 1955 and was one of the first women in the country to hold the degree of doctor of medicine. She subsequently suffered yet another un-successful marriage when her third union broke up because of what she had tried to bend over backwards and write and fight for women's rights. Her third husband, Sherif Hetata, was also supportive of her work and translated a lot of her writings. Upon her return to Egypt, El Saadawi was made editor-in-chief of Health magazine and Director of Public Health in Egypt. Between 1973 and 1979, she researched women and neuroses at Ain Shams University, going there frequently to visit the Qanatir Women's Prison. It was there that she met a woman who inspired the novel *Woman at Point*

Zero. Meeting the *Firdaus* profoundly influenced El Saadawi's feminist counter-narrative of liberation and institutional domination.

Patriarchy, as a system and notion, has prevailed throughout history. Inside social systems, gender inequality is rooted through which men are given the power and legitimacy to control women (as daughters, sisters and particularly as wives). El Sadaawy emphasizes that women are represented as inferior to men as it was documented in Gita from the beginning of creation. She argues that the Quran is taught in similar ways, and that men are considered superior — that men are viewed as superior to women in accounts of the qualities with which God has gifted one above the other. Accordingly, women's demands of equality with men would be continued (Hafez, 2014). Morrison (2015) asserts that in spite of the discussion and acknowledgment about the significance of equality between men and women, in Africa, women may never experience it. Women, of course, are not permitted to commit any sexual assaulting or any kind of physical harm towards men in the way they are allowed to. In her novel "Woman at Point Zero", El Saadwi depicts the extent of severity that *Firdaus* has faced by every male she comes across in her life. In addition to this, the author also shows that the reproduction of women is a sign of commodities that are to be sold or referred back to men (Morrison, 2015). A fact that should be emphasized here is that without marriage the sexual relations are disallowed in the Quran. However, men continue their violence and cruelty towards woman justifying their actions through certain verses from the Holy Quran, which they use to feed their desires. In addition, the regressive effect of the Middle Eastern culture reflects women with weak useless brains, that are not as strong as those of men (Baker, 2016).

Unfortunately, a buffalo in Egypt is more important and precious than a wife in terms of El Saadawi. As the author said, the first human on Earth in Islam, who was able to bear responsibility was Adam, and when God couldn't handle a suitable companion for Adam, he threw him into a deep sleep, took a rib from his chest, and created a woman out of it (Tadros, 2016). According to El Saadawi, men force women to sell their bodies at a certain price and the lowest price paid for the body is that of the wife. As she mentioned, all women are prostituting their bodies to one kind of man or another. She further argued that marriage is a lifelong prostitution; something she highlighted through the voice of *Firdaus* when comparing prostitution to marriage. El Saadawi has further said that women are forced to get into the system of marriage for the 'cruel suffering of women'.

According to El Saadawi marriage is deception in the form of prostitution but slightly in a different manner. When it comes to sex workers, they are paid a piece price every night, similarly a wife is paid every night for years, until she decides to get divorced or run away from the marriage. El Saadwai has found a lot of similarities between sex-working and marriage. The study will approach such questions as: How does *Firdaus*'s story reflect the struggles of women within patriarchal systems? Does the novel suggest that escape from patriarchy is possible, or is it ultimately a cycle? And in what ways does the novel criticize traditional gender roles expectations in Arab societies?

2. Statement of the Problem:

Female oppression is a huge problem that still lives in the very society that boasts the urbanization and modern technological advancements with pride. However, no matter how much globalization has spread in the countries, the grim reality that women are grievously discriminated against, oppressed, suppressed, and assaulted always surfaces through novels like *Woman at Point Zero*. The cultural belief systems, traditions, and religions in most societies impose oppression and domination on women under the patriarchy. Thus, women are always forced to submit. Many scholars have studied Firdaus and Lynda, the protagonists in El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* as mere characters artistically constructed by the writer to express the plight of women in the patriarchal Egyptian society and to launch a stage for both liberal and radical feminism (Shihada, 2007). Only little attention has been paid to these texts beyond this. This research is an examination of the negative effects of patriarchy on the female characters and their ways of life. Thus, it reveals how horrible experiences cause human beings to unconsciously develop devastating conditions, that lead to psychological pains in them (Tugume, 2021).

3. Relevance of Foucauldian theory in literary analysis:

One of Michel Foucault's most groundbreaking aspects is his reconceptualization of the relationship between power and knowledge. Foucault challenges the traditional view of power as a purely negative or repressive force (Foucault, 1991). He argued instead that power is intimately connected to the creation of knowledge. The exploration of the complex intertwining of power relations connects with the different forms of knowledge. Foucault's archeology of power and expertise offers a new way of understanding how truth combined with reality is constructed in society (Rabinow 1991). According to him, power is not a top-down, centralized force; rather it is that force which is wielded by those who are in positions of authority. Power is just not something that starts with the throne they are sitting on, but rather, elements of power are simply a matter of domination. Power is operating at every level of society. Power is just not a matter of coercion, but rather a force that is productive enough to shape the very fabric of social reality (Gaventa 2003). Without power, nothing exists, and will never exist in the future. According to Michel Foucault, power is an intricate web of relations that is derived from relationships rather than being a property of a specific set of people or organizations. Power has always operated through the production and spread of knowledge, shaping subjectivities, and regulating behavior. It is not just a unidirectional force but also something that involves dynamic, yet creating a reciprocal relationship involving collaboration and resistance (Foucault, 1998).

Power relationships have always been directly or indirectly interconnected to different forms of knowledge, revealing the deep interconnections between power and knowledge. Foucault explained that knowledge is not just a neutral entity but rather exists through specific discursive practices and institutional arrangements (Foucault, 2013). Archaeology of Knowledge of Foucault reveals the deep interconnections between power and knowledge. Knowledge is not neutral and does not exist independently, but it is interconnected with power relations.

Knowledge and Power are rather something that is produced and circulated through different forms of practices and institutional arrangements. Power relations shape the specific conditions of possibility for certain forms of knowledge to emerge, while knowledge in turn reinforces and legitimizes particular power relations (Foucault, 2013).

4. Purpose and scope of the study:

This study aims at developing critical literary analysis by urging readers to evaluate characters and situations in literature—and real life—through rational reasoning rather than emotional bias. Drawing on feminist literary theory and psychological analysis, the study examines the psychological trauma, which women in patriarchal African societies experienced, as represented in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*. The research also addresses how social constructs such as infertility stigma and female genital mutilation impact women's identities, agency, and mental status. By doing so, the study contributes to wider societal awareness and challenge culturally ingrained practices that marginalize women.

5. Theoretical Framework:

Foucault's work is full of instances that signify the discourses and epistemes are shaped by power relations (Foucault, 1980). In his study, of the history of sexuality, for example, Foucault shows how the sexuality discourse in the 19th century was closely tied to the emergence of new forms of biopower, which sought to regulate and control the life processes of populations. Similarly, in his analysis of the history of madness, Foucault's archeology of knowledge reveals how epistemes, or the underlying structures of knowledge in a given historical period, are shaped by power relations (Foucault, 1982). The power and knowledge combination is a central theme in Foucault's work. Foucault's archeology of knowledge challenges the notions that shape the understanding of the world, and how truth and reality are shaped by power relations. Foucault has rethought the concept of subject and author. He has implied the understanding of agency and resistance concerning the subject and author in society (Foucault, 1988). If the subject is not a sovereign, autonomous agent, but rather a product of discourse and power relations, then the question of agency and resistance becomes more complex and problematic. For Foucault, resistance is not a matter of individual will and choice, but rather a product of the various power relations and forms of knowledge that shape reality based on truth.

6. Literature Review:

As Nawal El Saadawi says, in the Quran and Gita, there is significance to silencing the woman's voice because they are always thought to be serving the men. The author confirms that religious norms are forged by men to reflect domination (van den Bogert, 2019). Further, she writes that priests, philosophers, writers, and scholars have continually tried to prove that women are best in subordinate conditions that have been ordained in heaven and beneficial on earth. For men, oppression is enough to prove their masculinity because it means that women are the inferior sex. Religion is actually used to intensify men's domination over women. What is mentioned in the Quran and Bible about Men's responsibility of concern towards women is adopted to escalate the meaning of women's obedience to men. The dehumanization of female

nature and role is so common in different aspects of society and specifically in marriage cases and education. As she works as a prostitute, Firdaus states that *"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."* (WPZ, p.135). Her words strengthen the belief mentioned above that men are superior to women because of innate distinctions. Such a belief is stressed by culture and a claim asserted to religion that paradise for women is conditioned by showing obedience to the men in their life. (Al-Darayseh, 2019). Then, what is deeply rooted in generations' minds is that women are created for the sake of men and they cannot live without those males: as Eve's creation was only possible by taking a piece of flesh from Adam and 'woman was created from man.'

7. Methodology:

This study utilizes a qualitative literary analysis framework with feminist and Foucauldian approaches. It undertakes a critical reading of Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, focusing on the themes of power, gender relations, and biopolitical control. The analysis centers on the experiences of Firdaus as a profound example of structural subjugation. Biopower and disciplinary governance are two patriarchal frameworks that can help illuminate the ways the protagonist's body and agency are controlled, that will be examined through a patriarchal lens, using the concepts of biopower and some of Foucault's disciplinary apparatuses. Also, radical feminist theory will be applied to examine Firdaus's acts of defiance to the social and cultural practices that devalue and treat women as mere objects. This combination of frameworks offers additional depth to the exploration of the gendered construction of power, flesh and control within and beyond the systems articulated in the novel.

8. Analysis and Discussion:

8.1. Power Structures in *Woman at Point Zero*:

In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus is treated in a way that suppresses and owns her sexuality. There are many events in the novel through which the protagonist Firdaus appears to be physically dominated by men. Another more formulated idea is that Firdaus or any other woman lives this life for the sake of men and their desires. She is completely disallowed to own herself. As a child, she is always given a mug to wash her father's legs, and she is taught how to obey (Gohar, 2016). Unfortunately, Firdaus was never given the choice about her body, mind, soul, or anything of herself. 'And give the women their dowries willingly', El Saadawi argues that the groom owes compensation in return. The woman's body is an object to the purchase; for her, it helps in representing capital she has the right to exploit (Quyoom, 2017). As evidence and just like any owned material, Firdaus is sold by her uncle to free himself from debts. A man buys a girl, he pays in return to the male counterparts of the family and then uses her for the sake of pleasure and reproduction, as she will further give birth to girls to be sold later in exchange of money. This means that the workforce is thus always assumed to be masculine, and products are objects to be used, objects of transaction among men alone (Wilany, 2017).

In *Woman at Point Zero*, El Saadawi explains and explores the different subjugating aspects of patriarchal society that women of Egypt and the Middle East have to go through daily. The

power structures involve subjugating women through sexual violence, physical assault, domestic violence, female genital mutilation, child brides, considering women as sex objects, and discrimination in religious institutions and workplaces, harmful and fatal cultural practices that oppress and pause the personal and social development of women in the society. Nawal El Sadaawi has exposed the grim reality of Egyptian society and its harsh treatment of women. The author significantly puts forward the cultural and religious barriers in the form of a belief system that stops the self-evaluation and self-development of females. The story is a true event and pulls all the cords and strings of the society, which reflects the hardcore truth and reality.

8.3. Firdaus's Resistance and Reclamation of Agency:

According to Groth and Birnbaum, from his book *Men Who Rape*, 'clinical study of rapists and sexual assaulters reveals that rape is a way to serve primary nonsexual needs. It is more of expressing power, domination, and anger. Forcible sexual assault is motivated by retaliatory and compensatory motives.' (Groth and Birnbaum, 1981). Therefore, the psychology of men raping women explains the basic reason behind Bayoumi abusing Firdaus.

As she is severely beaten by her Husband Sheikh, Firdaus goes to Bayoumi to help her finding a job as an attempt to be self-sufficient. As Firdaus says, "I have a secondary school certificate. Maybe I can find a job with my secondary, or with my primary school certificate. But, if necessary I'm prepared to do anything, even the kind of work that requires no certificates." (WPZ, p. 62) At the beginning, Bayoumi behaves as a helpful person and provides her with a room to live in. As she tries to leave and find a work, she faced another kind of treatment. She is locked in a room and every day "she is reduced to a mere sex object" (Mamudu and Aaron, 2022). As represented in the novel, "He would come back in the middle of the night, pull the cover away from me, slap my face, and then bear down on me with all his weight. I kept my eyes closed and abandoned my body." (WPZ, p. 66) The incident of rape and sexual assault is described as power rape, which is the kind of assault defining the compensation for underlying inadequate feelings. Power rape is more of a "way to express issues of mastery, control, strength, authority, identity, and capability" (Irmayani et al., 2024). These types of sexual assaults are also known as anger rape, or aggression, which is also known as an "anger motive". These assaults are considered to be means of absolute power and control with a desire of repression. Although rape is prohibited in the Quran, the Islamic community witnesses many of these cases depending on a belief that "the Quran demands to take control of women for a healthy society" (Abbas, 2023).

Kind and good-natured, softhearted women like Firdaus can become violent when exposed to heartless and cruel male domination. Sharifa was the one who taught Firdaus how to protect herself in the male-dominated society, where every man is a cruel flesh-eater and blood-sucker. Sharifa has gone through severe molestation and torture from men and has decided to be hard-hearted. Women are known to be kind-hearted, soft, and loving with a gentle and tender heart, but, oppression and unfavorable situations can change the personality of these women. Sharifa said that her skin might be soft, but her heart is cruel and her bite is lethal, like a snake. Sharifa

taught Firdaus to understand that she needs to be like a snake and keep poisonous fangs, or else they will bite her. They need to see the cruelty in her heart or else they will swallow her whole. Sharifa tells Firdaus to bring out her claws and fangs to escape the oppression and teaches her to shed off all her ideal qualities and traits, which a woman requires to maintain her chastity in a patriarchal society. Firdaus reclaims her agency when the jail warden asks her to sign the petition to reduce her sentence of punishment. However, she had been looking forward to freedom and escape from male domination in this material world. Therefore, she refuses to sign the petition, as she believes she has not done anything wrong. Rather she feels proud in going to heaven, which is unknown to all the people on earth. She believed that her sacrifice would make her superior to any prince on Earth. She deeply desired to get rid of her body, which has given her more pain than comfort.

8.4. Exploration of how bodies are controlled and regulated in the novel:

"Why would she refuse him? This is her best chance to get married." (WPZ, p. 49) *Woman at Point Zero* depicts a vivid picture in the middle east, where women are exchanged and sold under the term of marriage:" This is part of the chain of reproduction in the Middle East as presented in the novel "(Munthe and Wulan, 2023). Such an image is clearly reflected when the uncle and his wife discussing Firdaus' marriage:

Another picture is portrayed while her father and his wife were talking about her marriage and what may happen if she refused Sheikh Mahmoud (a widower of 40 years older than Firdaus). *"Do not forget what a nose she has. It's big and ugly like a tin mug. Besides, she has inherited nothing and has no income of her own. We will never find a better husband for her than Sheikh Mahmoud."* (WPZ, p. 49) Firdaus' mother decides to ask for a big dowry from Sheikh which might be some hundreds of pounds or perhaps even two hundred or so (Al-Alassadi, 2019). Firdaus's father agrees to the decision further adding – *"if he pays a hundred pounds, then Allah will indeed have been generous to us, and I would not be so greedy as to ask for more."* (WPZ, p. 49) Moreover, the uncle plans to free his loans with Firdaus' dowry money". Firdaus is sold for some hundred pounds and that is the meaning of marriage in the Middle East, and especially to the family members of Firdaus. The hypocrisy and shift of control are seen in the novel, where Firdaus's family keeps the money which usually belongs to the wife — the dowry — according to the Islamic teaching. Usually, the dowry is for the bride and the family has no right over it (Emmanuel, 2023).

8.5. Discussion of the physical and emotional subjugation of women's bodies:

El Saadawi argues that our patriarchal societies have destroyed what deserves value and respect. In that she is referring to the dowry and alimony as kinds of selling exchange. Thus, women in our societies are treated as commodities or goods. El Saadawi thoughts reflect the cultural story of Eve and Pandora who are disallowed of owning themselves and their presence is associated with men being. Money is given to the wives in return for the physical and mental subjugation to their husbands and the dowry is given willingly by the grooms. According to El Saadawi, the dowry displays control over women. While they are given a dowry, a woman is

expected to show “submission and obedience” in return. If the monetary value is removed, her worth plummets in the eyes of the groom, and she ends up prostituting her body to this specific man. (Ahmadi, 2021). The discussion between the uncle and his wife emphasizes that idea. They tend to evaluate and judge Firdaus according to her appearance and income. Since she has no money, then she has no value, as a woman is something, which proves the subjugation of women in the eyes of people in the Middle East (Wangmo and Advisor, 2018). What is more, El Sadaawy focuses on the way Firdaus is passed from a man to another. She describes that passing as “the passage into the social order, into the symbolic order, into order as such is assured by the fact that men, or groups of men, circulate women among themselves, according to a rule known as the incest taboo”. A fact that results in a sexualized female belongs to” the socio- cultural horizon”. El Saadawi’s argument collaborates with the message that the novel *Woman at Point Zero* raises that all the exchange structures of patriarchal communities as the ones in the Middle East and all the modalities of productive work that are recognized, valued, and rewarded in these societies are men’s business.

9. Conclusion:

El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* presents a powerful narrative that critiques the patriarchal and biopolitical systems that govern and dominate women's bodies and lives. Through the character of Firdaus, the novel reveals how systemic oppression—rooted in cultural, religious, and socio-political institutions—manifests as psychological trauma, physical subjugation, and enforced submission. Firdaus’s ultimate refusal to seek forgiveness symbolizes a radical reclamation of agency, asserting her identity and autonomy in the face of death. The study illustrates how Foucauldian theory, particularly the concepts of power and biopolitics, offers a strong framework for interpreting the mechanisms of control portrayed in the novel. Ultimately, this research emphasizes the importance of critically engaging with literature as a means to comprehend and resist the deep-seated inequalities faced by women in patriarchal societies.

In *Woman at Point Zero*, El Saadawi illustrates the harsh oppression women undergo in patriarchal structures through Firdaus’s story. The novel depicts the different responses women take—violence and defiance—to the persistent rage of the on-going oppression which includes abuse, discrimination, and neglect from their formative years, even when they remain compliant and caring. Firdaus’s ordeal encapsulates the lack of protection that women receive from societal, religious, and legal structures which rather serve to impose male dominance and simultaneously reinforce and strengthen subjugation. Through the novel, the author urges women everywhere to rise against oppressive patriarchal systems, extending her powerful feminist call to protest and denunciation of subjugation in universal sisterhood with oppressed women.

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