The Rebellion of the Oppressed in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*

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Abstract

This paper examines the character of Firdaus in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, tracing her development from childhood to adulthood. In the course of analyzing the phases of her growth, the paper comes to terms with the forces of abuse and oppression confronting the heroine, and her efforts in tackling them. The feminist theory is applied in the interpretation of the text which reveals the conscious efforts of Firdaus in navigating through her suppressive circumstances and challenging same. The paper appreciates her courage and determination to stand up as a woman to the limiting and debilitating forces of patriarchy, and recommends to all the oppressed women to follow suit.

Keywords: Feminism, Androcentric, Oppression, Marginalization, Patriarchy.

Introduction

Radical feminism as a theoretical framework is used in the interpretation of Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*. Generally, feminism is the quest for equality between the human sexes. The concept was introduced by Eugenie Potoniepierre and her friends and was launched in Berlin at the September 1896 Women's Congress and became popular in the twentieth century (Offen, 2). In the opinion of Catherine Mackinnon, feminism sees the predicament of women as a product of the institutionalized biases of the androcentric order (515).

Much earlier in 1796, the marginalization of women had been a source of concern to women themselves. Mary Wollstonecraft, in her "Vindication of the Rights to Women", exposes the fact that "men have prejudiced women by exploiting them politically and economically" (16). This feeling has been seen to form the basis for the agitation of equality between genders in the scheme of things. In her radical feminism, Firestone believes that the feminist revolution is not just the elimination of male privilege but of the sex distinction itself (5), to deconstruct the cultural significance placed on a particular gender.

The scholarship on *Woman at Point Zero* so far reviewed here, are in a way similar in that they look at the oppressed condition of the woman as caused by the man. In other words, they blame the sufferings of the woman on the man. However, Abdulwahead, Talif, Termizi and Jujarsee it in the opposite light, basing their argument on Chinweizu's masculinist theory which says that women are more powerful than men and have the keys to their self-emancipation. They see the oppression and sufferings of women as primarily caused by other women. These critics show how women contribute to their own sufferings (in the hands of men) and the short-lived triumph of women over patriarchal stereotypes. In other words, they look at the double otherization of women – how they are firstly oppressed by their fellow women, and secondly by men. Consequently, they assert that, "El Saadawi aesthetically portrays how women in her geographical milieu are doubly oppressed and molested firstly by their fellow women and then, men" (207) To give credence to their argument, Abdulwahead, Talif, Termizi and Jujar make reference to situations in the text where other women oppress and exploit their fellow women. For instance, they make reference to female genital mutilation as carried out by women; Firdaus' mistreatment by her uncle's wife who also exploits her sexuality by marrying Firdaus off to her greedy, sick and violent but rich uncle for a huge bride price; and Sharifa, the professional prostitute who introduces Firdaus to prostitution and benefits from it. The underlying argument here is that all that Firdaus suffers in the hands of men are as a result of her oppression by women. Thus, they underscore, "all the traumatic experiences of the heroine (Firdaus) are brought to bear heavily on the heroine through the outrageous oppressive activities of the women" (210).

However seemingly valid Abdulwahead, Talif, Termizi and Jujar's point may be, it should be understood that these women only act based on what has been built into their psyche over the generations. It should be understood that these women who 'oppress' other women have been acculturated over the years by the principles, precepts, customs, and traditions of the patriarchal system.

Hence, the women only regurgitate the imbibed values. In line with this, we can also look at female genital mutilation as a bidding for the women to carry out since it is a strategy employed by the patriarchal society to control the sexuality of women. Ironically, these women have come to believe that it is good for women to be circumcised. So, they carry out the circumcision of the female children. Similarly, though Firdaus' uncle's wife's actions may have been outrageous, she is acting out the belief of the cultural milieu that females are not to be educated like men, but to be married off.

If one considers other female characters in the text, one would arrive at the conclusion that there is a complicated web in which the woman is entangled. She is to be continuously oppressed and exploited from different angles. Even sharifa who exploits Firdaus is a victim of male oppression. Thus, she asks Firdaus, "What did the son of dog do to you" having experienced the same treatment and knowing that such is the fate of the average woman in her society. Firdaus also discovers at her work place that women are oppressed by men and are cheap, if not unpaid 'harlots' even at the workplace. What this implies for Firdaus is that there is no decent place for women in her society; consequently, she resolves to go back to prostitution where she can make the money. Against this backdrop, it is wrong for Abdulwahead, Talif, Termizi and Jujar to conclude that women are the architects of their own oppression.

The Oppression and Rebellion of Firdaus

Helene Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa" notes as follows:

> When the 'repressed' of their culture and their society returns, it's an explosive, destructive, staggering return, with a force never yet unleashed and equal to the most forbidding of suppressions. For when the Phallic period comes to an end, women will have been ... borne up to the highest and most violent incandescence (886)

The above defines the character and actions of Firdaus in Saadawi's *Wo*man *at Point Zero*. She is repressed, suppressed, and oppressed right from the beginning of her story; she is beaten by every man she comes across, starting from her father, her husband, Sheikh Mahmoud, Bayoumi, and Marzouk, the victim of her fury. Although Firdaus does not really receive beatings from her father directly, she represents all women, and any violence done to any woman is, by extension, violence done to her. Hence, the violence her father perpetrates against her mother is that perpetrated against her; the beatings her mother receives are her own beatings. After all, the accumulation of her knowledge of the condition of women in general is what makes her to want to raise her hand high and bring it violently down on any man she comes across. Firdaus tells us that one thing her father knows is "how to beat his wife and make her bite the dust each night" (10). Despite the violence done to her, her mother can neither revolt nor resist. This shows that the woman, at this point, is inevitably vulnerable and, as it were, battered, and endures the violence perpetrated against her as a form of obedience to the Holy Qur'an.

Firdaus suffers the same fate at the hands of her own husband, Sheikh Mahmoud. However, as it becomes unbearable for her, she escapes from his house and goes into the street, not scared of what may happen to her. Hence, she says, "One day he hit me with his heavy stick until the blood ran from my nose and ears. So, I left, but this time I did not go to my uncle's house. I walked through the streets with swollen eyes and a bruised face" (47). This experience is a result of Firdaus' feeling of powerlessness in a society driven by men's endless need for power, money and sex (El Saadawi, 33). It should be noted here that, though Firdaus cannot defend herself from the beatings, she walks out on the man and the system of marriage that subjects her to such violence. Thus, her action is radical and revolutionary, as the woman is expected to bear the pains of a violent marriage in perfect obedience. The same is recorded of her experience with Bayoumi; though she cannot defend herself, she walks away.

Before we go into Firdaus' encounter with Marzouk, it should be noted that she has always been different from other women, despite the fact that she has not summoned courage enough to do the imaginable. She is not thrilled by the idea of love or men; she aims for the unachievable (for women) in her society. She

imagines becoming a doctor, an engineer, a lawyer, or a judge; she even ponders the idea of becoming a head of state. So, she says:

> I knew that women did not become heads of state, but I felt that I was not like other women, nor like other girls around me who kept talking about love, or men. For these were subjects I never mentioned. Somehow I was not interested in the things that occupied their minds, and what seemed of importance to them struck me as being trivial. (25)

She aspires to the greatest heights, which have been occupied by the masculine in her society. The point is that she has always wanted to grow beyond her sphere as a woman. Also, while in secondary school, she reads and discovers that all the "rulers were men. They were men who sowed corruption on the earth and plundered their peoples… shooting poisoned arrows" (26-27). What this implies for Firdaus is that if she must become the leader or prominent figure that she desires, she must do away with gentleness, modesty, morality, and any other attributes that define a woman and plunder her earth and her people. This is actually a revolution against the system of conceptions, notions, and perceptions of the woman as the weaker sex; it is an uprooting of the patriarchal thought pattern. She also comes into contact with the histories of the world and reads "about the crimes committed by kings and rulers, about wars, the peoples, revolutions, and the lives of revolutionaries" (26). The point is, all these prepared her for the future, where she would come under the unyielding grip of Marzouk. Though Firdaus has a good knowledge of her world and the grim reality of it, she has not summoned enough courage to apply it. She has never thought of giving violence back to the sender. Her eyes only opened up to this during the argument between Sharifa and her pimp, Fawzy. As Fawzy threatens to beat Sharifa, she tells him, "If you hit me, Fawzy, l will hit back" (65), and it dawns on her that she is not to be compliant to the beatings and exploitation of men that she has suffered over the years.

Consequently, as the pimp, Marzouk, comes to threaten her independence and success as a prostitute, Firdaus no longer complies. He tells her that every prostitute needs a pimp to protect her, and when she tells him that she can protect herself, he says, "There isn't a woman on earth who can protect herself" (100),

showing the patriarchal perception of the woman as the weaker sex who is in dire need of the 'protection' of the man. At this point, she is about to leave her own house to find a new kind of freedom that would make her a master of her own. Marzouk appears again and stops her. He tells her that as a woman and as a prostitute, she cannot be a master of her own, and as she tries to leave, he locks the door. She tries to force the door open, and he slaps her, but this time she gives it back to him even more violently. Then he tries to reach for his knife, but she is quicker, and so she stabs him to death. The following excerpt will give us a clearer picture of the scene:

> Then the arrogant expression of the master, the aggressive look of the male who fears nothing, returned. I caught hold of the latch of the door to open it, but he lifted his arm up in the air and slapped me. I raised my hand even higher than he had done, and brought it down violently on his face. The whites of his eyes went red. His hand started to reach for the knife he carried in his pocket, but my hand was quicker than his. I raised the knife and buried it deep in his neck, pulled it out of his neck and then thrust it deep into his chest, pulled it out of his chest and plunged it deep into his belly, I stuck the knife into almost every part of' his body. I was astonished to find how easily my hand moved as I thrust the knife into his flesh, and pulled it out almost without effort. (104)

The above excerpt is critical to understanding *Woman at Point Zero* from a radical feminist perspective. Here, the heroine, Firdaus, has defied preconceived notions about women as weaklings by defending and protecting herself from the violence and aggressiveness of the male figure. Even Marzouk had told Firdaus earlier that she could neither protect herself nor be a master of her own. However, she shocks him by giving him an even heavier slap in the face; she also gives him the great shocker of his life, which he does not live to feel. Firdaus herself is surprised at how swiftly she stabs Marzouk to death, and she wonders: "Why was it that I had never stabbed a man before [when it could be this easy]?" (104) and realises that it is fear, the result of the stereotypes that have been ingrained in her consciousness, that has made her incapable. On another plane, what this implies is that she now sees violence or even murder as a simple act that she can perform at any time. This thought of violence or murder as a simple act also defies the patriarchal thought

that a woman is faint-hearted and therefore cannot think of carrying out any act of violence or murder. By this singular act also, she has purged her fears and is fulfilled; she is triumphant. According to her:

> I opened the door and walked down the stairs into the street. My body was as light as a feather, as though its weight had been nothing more than the accumulation of fear over the years... the Nile had something almost magical about it. The air was fresh. I walked down the street, my head held high to the heavens, with the pride of having destroyed all masks to reveal what is hidden (105).

That is a show of the joy that comes with liberating oneself from the oppressor—the fulfillment that comes with it, the refreshing nature of it, and the pride of having won a fierce battle.

Her pride (at achieving such a feat) and her new-found power are further dramatised as she encounters the rich Arab prince on her 'triumphant entry' into the streets. As the prince doubts her ability to kill as a woman, "I [Firdaus] lifted my hand high above my head and landed it violently on his face" (109), and she tells him that killing him with a knife would be as easy as she had slapped him and that it requires the same movement of the hand. At this point, he can no longer look at her again as he is filled with fear, and her proving her ability to kill now turns into fury. So, she is about to further prove to him her ability to kill even him, but for his screaming:

> Perhaps now you can believe that I am perfectly capable of killing you, for you are no better than an insect, and all you do is to spend the thousands you take from your starving people on prostitutes.' Before I had time to raise my hand high up in the air once more, *he screamed in panic like a woman in trouble.* He did not stop screaming until the police arrived the scene [Italics added]. (109).

One of the points to be noted is the fact that Firdaus is proud and does not panic that she has killed a man. Hence, she tells the prince and even proves it to him, which again is a show of her new-found strength. Another point, especially from the italicized portion, is the reversal of attributes; from the phrase, 'screamed in

panic like a woman in trouble', one idea comes to mind: fear and helplessness of the vulnerable. So, the prince, a man who is supposed to be strong, fearless, and courageous, has become the helpless victim who cries out in extreme fear. Hence, at this point, symbolically, the man has become a woman. This is a radical, revolutionary upturning of the patriarchal idea that the man is the stronger sex and the woman is the weaker.

Even when the police ask if she is a killer or a criminal, Firdaus tells them that she is truly a killer but not a criminal because she only kills criminals like the police do. This means that she is proud to have done and attempted to do again what the police do, namely, the killing of criminals. By doing so, she also exalts her act of murder into the realm of the moral. As a matter of fact, her conception of crime and criminality is beyond the purview of the police. Thus, for her, kings and princes are also criminals for plundering the earth and exploiting their subjects, but the police will not understand that. She also calls all men (including the policemen) criminals, and they arrest her, saying that she is savage and dangerous. The idea that the woman is fearful and lacks courage is further negatedby Firdaus's submission to arrest and acceptance of her condemnation to death by hanging without trial. Firdaus' reaction to the death sentence beats our imagination; she is bold and proud to die for committing murder. This is because, for her, by the singular act of killing a man, she has triumphed over the forces of life that held her bound. Earlier in her narration, she said, "All my life I have been searching for something that would fill me with pride and make me feel superior to anyone else, including kings, princes, and rulers" (9). As Gohar puts it, at this point Firdaus prefers to be sentenced to death, rather than live as a sex object or a cheap commodity at men's disposal (183). She is the opposite of her mother who tolerated abuse and conformed to patriarchal expectations. This means that the killing of Marzouk, her oppressor, is the fulfillment of her life's desire. Again, Marzouk is a symbolic representation of the male and the patriarchal system that oppresses her and other women. Therefore, by killing him, she has defeated the oppressive system that subjugates women. Thus, she has no iota of fear, as she will be dying fulfilled.

As a matter of fact, while she is being detained, one of the policemen and the prison doctor present her at different times with the option of appealing to the president,

saying that she could be pardoned or at least be given life imprisonment rather than the death sentence, but she still refuses to appeal. Thus, she tells the policeman, "But I don't want to be released... I want no pardon for my crime. For what you call my crime was no crime" (110). Firdaus' confirmation of her action, is quite in agreement with Onyemaechi Udumuku's opinion that in *Woman at Point Zero*, the internal landscape is an attempt to include woman into the scheme of things, to make the woman speak in her own terms (63-64). For her, appealing for her release or pardon means accepting that she has committed a crime by killing Marzouk in self-defense. Hence, she is not going to appeal but will accept death over the chance of living again. She also tells the man that there is no need for the pardon, as she will not stop killing men if freed. Here lies her courage and bravery: choosing death over life.

In patriarchal thought, Firdaus, as a woman, should be downcast at this point, crying and begging to be miraculously rescued from the death sentence. But here is Firdaus, unmoved by the fact that she will be taken to the gallows in no distant time. Rather, she intellectualises how that she has found the truth about the cruelty of her androcentric world; how she has discovered the truth that it is as easy as anything else to kill her oppressor, the man; how that she is able to tell this truth to her oppressor without fear because truth births courage and has savage power; how that she is no longer afraid of death because truth and death "are similar in that they both require great courage" (112) to face them; how that she has killed with the truth and not with a knife because truth also kills just like death; how that it is this truth she has discovered, not the knife, that frightens the men; how that the truth is savagely powerful and more dangerous; how that they want to kill her not because she has killed but because of the fear of the truth; how that the truth has given her enormous strength to face anything - even death and destruction. In fact, she is proud of her action and the consequences of it. This is true as she conceptualises and perceives her impending death as a journey, a translation into a higher realm. So, she says:

Now I am waiting for them. After a little while they will come to take me away. Tomorrow morning, I shall no longer be here. I will be in a place which no man knows. This journey to an unknown destination, to a place unknown to all those who live on this earth, be they king or prince, or ruler, fills me with pride. (111).

Firdaus' decision to accept death sentence, appears to be informed by the fact that female oppression is deeply ingrained in the culture of the societies which ensures the continuation of patriarchal control, that will be difficult to change (Fwangyil, 15).

So, for Firdaus, death is a dauntless and virtuous choice, as it would translate her into a world inaccessible to the greatest of men alive. Her choice of and reaction to death are indeed unimaginable for a woman; her choice and reaction defy the perception of the woman as the weaker sex, even as bravery and courage are masculine attributes in patriarchal thought. By choosing death over life, she makes a courageous and dauntless choice. Taguma argues that Firdaus died a free woman because she reached self-actualization.

Conclusion

In patriarchal perception, the woman cannot rise up to her defence, and she is to be subservient to the brutality meted against her, even as the masculine- favoured society constantly conditions her mind with attributes of modesty and gentleness. Thus, masculine society envisages no form of violence from women. Nonetheless, against preconceived notions of the woman as a pushover, Firdaus rises, through knowledge, experience, and consciousness of her repressed and oppressed situation, above such limitations and murders the man figure who will not stop pestering her freedom and existence as a fully independent human being. The paper appreciates her courage and determination to stand up as a woman to the limiting and debilitating forces of patriarchy, and recommends to all the oppressed women to follow suit.

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