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## A Critical Reading of Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*

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### Abstract

Women all over the world, and Egypt specifically, have been looked upon as second-class citizens for a long time in comparison to men. However, this paper argues that it is unethical for feminists, specifically here Nawal El Saadawi, to discuss this issue in an extreme way where the truth is lost. Hating men and holding them wholly at fault for the plight of women while giving alibis to and even praising women for their self-destructive decisions is not a solution. The paper critically reads El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, discussing the very methods and elements that El Saadawi uses in the novel. Such methods and elements reveal El Saadawi to be a person who states one thing publicly and does another on the personal level. She misrepresents her protagonist. She commits misandry, and she gives life to a character who deals with choice as an obstacle. Above all, she uses literary stylistic devices through which she attempts to enforce her point of view on her readers.

**Keywords:** El Saadawi, feminism, blame, choice, misandry, misrepresentation.

### Introduction

Why it is that feminism has been looked upon negatively? One reason may be that feminists have allowed feminism to shift from its original course. It was originally a movement that fought against the oppression of women and demanded that they, as human beings, have rights similar to those of men. Nawal El Saadawi has contributed to this shift. She is described by Ahlam Mas'ad, in her book *The Mirrors of the Father and Authority* (2006), as "having a radical personality, screaming and attacking with hatred all those who surround her with attempts to marginalize women and reduce their importance [my translation]"<sup>1</sup>. What feminism has turned into in El Saadawi's novel is unfortunately simply misandry, the conviction that only women are upright. This strikes an imbalance in society and reflects a distorted image of society in general.

El Saadawi discusses the plight of women in general, and in Egypt in particular, against the patriarchal system in her novel *Woman at Point Zero*

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(*WPZ*). The protagonist Firdaus is an example of the injustice suffered by females from early childhood during the 1970s. Firdaus is an innocent victim of men's selfishness as well as their sexual and animalistic desires.

The present study is a criticism of the way in which El Saadawi takes her feminism to that very extreme. According to El Saadawi, "[t]he woman stands before the man, deprived by the world of her freedom, her honour, her name, her self-respect, her true nature and her will"<sup>2</sup>. In this she declares that all women are victims of patriarchy in all societies; she portrays her protagonist as suffering from male oppression in every possible way and from every man she is confronted with throughout her life. I instead contend that it is unfair to make her lens the truth, as it is biased, incomplete, and not well established, and therefore she will not help direct or solve the very real problems women face by exaggerating them.

I examine El Saadawi's philosophy in relation to the relationship between the men and women in the novel, discussing areas in the novel where El Saadawi uses faulty evidence to support her argument. I show how both El Saadawi and Firdaus declare one thing to the world and do another. El Saadawi creeps into the character of Firdaus and lets her personality take over Firdaus'. She defines masculinity in very unrealistic, negative ways, and she does not hold her character responsible for any of the incidents in her life. I thus show that Firdaus victimizes her own self by the choices she makes.

### **Review of Related Literature**

Nawal El Saadawi has been described by her critics as a feminist writer; she, on the other hand, describes her heroines as young women who are caught in adversity due to the social patriarchal constraints of their society. Most critics support El Saadawi's approach and share similar views, discussing the same ideas in different ways and elaborating on them; however, a minority does not and at the same time have very different views of why they do not support her.

In "Writing the Savage Truth: *Woman at Point Zero*" (2000), Diana Royer discusses the novel in relationship to painful circumstances that the female endures in Egyptian society. The first is female circumcision, a cultural practice that takes place in many parts of Africa, and which she criticizes in her article. She notes that, according to consensus, this procedure is practiced "to protect the [girl's] virginity, and therefore her honor"<sup>3</sup>. However, she declares that the result of this practice on the other hand scars the character of the girl for as long as she lives.<sup>4</sup>

"In Cradle to Grave: An Analysis of Female Oppression in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*" (2012), Gloria Fwangyil blames patriarchy on

ingrained cultural practices, which she describes as “a molded structure.”<sup>5</sup> She argues that they brought about the end of Firdaus and that it is the patriarch who oppresses Firdaus at various stages of her life. Fwangyil constantly repeats how Firdaus was inexperienced and married “at a tender age”<sup>6</sup>; however, this is what I oppose in my current paper, since she was remotely away from society for six years doing her boarding school education, which she was outstanding at.

In “A Journey to Prison of Two Young Women, Lemona and Firdaus” (2005), Raisa Simola terms *Woman at Point Zero* a “prison fiction” in which prisoners, convicted of murder such as Firdaus, make “mental journeys” into the reason behind their imprisonment in an attempt to shorten their time in prison. They visit their past through flashback—all the physical abuse, emotional abuse, traumatic incidents, unfinished education they suffered, as well as the revenge they wreaked on men that culminated in their prison sentences<sup>7</sup>.

In “Travelling and Female Mobility in Saadawi's Fiction” (2015), Saiyma Aslam discusses the fact that mobility is a common trait and practice of the male at the expense of the female due to conservatism and their economic class, which then results in their development being limited.<sup>8</sup> She argues that Firdaus thinks she can escape abuse with the mobility she gives herself access to, but she instead is sexually abused on and on. However my study argues that she is sexually abused for making uncalculated choices.

In “Manifestations of Hysteria in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*” (2015), Omar Abdulla *et al.* claim that Firdaus “developed a psychotic need to destroy” all men due to the sexual experiences she faced, and as a result they have “discolored her perception of men.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, Firdaus suffers from a psychological disease. Its symptoms are “alienation, loss of speech and fear.”<sup>10</sup> I therefore argue in this case that if she were suffering from such an illness she would be unfit as a valid representative of Egyptian women.

In her article “On the Condition of the Colonized Woman: The Nervous Condition of Firdaus in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*” (2001), Firenze Giunti refers to the novel as an “allegory” of the life of an Egyptian woman and her struggles against the wider oppression of colonialism and the smaller struggle of patriarchal power. Giunti describes the written word as a “revolutionary tool”<sup>11</sup> to reveal the oppressive patriarchy in Egypt just as the postcolonial literature gives voice to the colonized and makes visible what was once invisible. The problem is that El Saadawi states that it is the story of *every* woman, and for that very reason I argue against both Giunti and El Saadawi.

In “Nawal El Saadawi and the Women Question” (2014), Iyabode Daniel opposes the other critics severely and considers El Saadawi's characterizations a one-dimensional condemnation of all male characters and a justification of the

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acts of the female characters. She thus considers her an “anti-sexist sexist” devoted to “exterminating the male” and therefore not concerned with revealing the truth. Daniel instead is an advocate for interdependence of the sexes, and she promotes “positive co-existence,”<sup>12</sup> which benefits society.

The subsequent sections in my paper will refute the arguments that support El Saadawi and will go with and beyond Daniel’s argument.

Men force women to sell their bodies at a price, and ... the lowest paid body is that of a wife. All women are prostitutes of one kind or another. Because I was intelligent I preferred to be a free prostitute, rather than an enslaved wife.<sup>13</sup>

In *Woman at Point Zero*, El Saadawi criticizes the Egyptian society and claims that it is a patriarchal society in which men think lowly of women and thus have victimized and degraded them. Through the novel she argues that the patriarchal Egyptian society receives its power from religion and culture, that as a result men perceive women in general as objects and products that can be sold by their guardians and bought by husbands, and that the sole importance of women is that they are objects to satisfy men’s sexual desires. The end of her reasoning is the claim that in the eyes of men, women are essentially sexual objects whether they are paid for sex or not, and that a prostitute who is paid is better than a wife because she chooses the man and the amount of money she receives. On the other hand, a wife, though no more than a prostitute, earns no money and is stuck with one man, the husband. Therefore, El Saadawi claims that women in Egypt are treated unfairly and have no rights.

### **The Research Argument**

If feminism is depicted as beneficial to both men and women and as a major element in achieving equality, audiences may be more apt to support this movement. If, on the one hand, feminists are considered of man-hating, self-righteous women, it is unlikely that people will even want to consider themselves feminists.<sup>14</sup>

In ancient Egypt, women and men had equal rights, and women could even become rulers.<sup>15</sup> Later, in Islam, the religion most Egyptians followed, men and women were given equal rights and responsibilities. In the Holy Qur’an, one of the verses of Surat al-Hujurat translates as: “O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted.”<sup>16</sup> My paper argues against El Saadawi’s claim (summarized in the previous section) that all women are victims of patriarchy in all societies, as modeled by the Egyptian society and her protagonist Firdaus. In her words, “Firdaus is known around the world. It’s

true. From Jakarta to Jeddah to Jerusalem and Johannesburg, Muslim and non-Muslim women know this woman.”<sup>17</sup> From this, El Saadawi has universalized Firdaus and her position in society; she is a published example of the injustice that the female suffers from, from the time of her early childhood till the time she becomes an older woman. But at the same time, one can tell that El Saadawi came to spread an unrealistic view of the relationship between men and women—in Egypt in particular and in the world in general. My aim here is to criticize the extreme criticism of her novel's Egyptian society by revealing holes and gaps in her argument and the important contributions that the heroine Firdaus makes to her dehumanization and that cause her pathetic end. The victimizer is thus not the Egyptian patriarchal society but rather Firdaus herself.

My research reveals and proves that El Saadawi is from among those “writers with feminist sympathies who take up their pens to portray the woman as they perceive her,”<sup>18</sup> writers who thus do not give a panoramic portrayal of the truth. Evidence from the life of El Saadawi herself, from the interactions and descriptions of Firdaus and the other characters, and from the novel's literary and stylistic devices reveals that the views and ideas that spread throughout the novel are simply bias. The truth is that El Saadawi has chosen to cross the borders of reality to illuminate her thoughts about the unsatisfying condition of women in her society: “She whole heartedly condemns the male character and brazenly justifies the female ones.”<sup>19</sup> By doing this El Saadawi sacrifices the truth for her feelings and for the way she perceives the condition of women in her society.

In addition to that, generalizing her opinion in the way that she has does not help solve the problem; rather, she has become a big part of the structuring of the problem. She is unfair to her own self and to other women by victimizing Firdaus in the way she has. She refuses to hold herself and Firdaus responsible as an individual for her thoughts and actions and reactions and instead puts Firdaus, and thus herself, in a never-ending cycle of blame towards every man she knows and meets and resultant decline.

## **Textual Analysis**

### ***Double Standards***

Through the heroine Firdaus, El Saadawi declares one thing to the world but does another on the practical personal level. El Saadawi, at all times, finds a way to pity Firdaus who, as an adult, makes unwise choices which result in her pathetic state; however, El Saadawi considers her unique in terms of her thoughts and endurance, and praises her continuous condemnation of men. Finally, El Saadawi considers Firdaus a victim of the Egyptian patriarchal society. Like Firdaus, El Saadawi lived a life of poverty and abuse as a child;

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however, later became independent as an adult. El Saadawi did not make unwise choices in real life, instead she took her life and career into her own hands. Virginia Woolf declares in *A Room of One's Own* that a writer who is “harassed and distracted with hates and grievances cannot produce anything of enduring value.”<sup>20</sup> It seems El Saadawi was well aware of this and for that she never gave an open eye or ear to harassment or grievances. Instead, she was a model of true perseverance. In her autobiographical novel *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, she states, “I’d decided to do battle, to drown in my own sweat, to face society on feet of iron.”<sup>21</sup> She was progressive and made choices different from those of many girls from her town and country. She did not allow the obstacles—which she revealed to be tradition and powerful men like her father, her husbands!, and even the leader of her country—to direct her life or take advantage of her the way Firdaus allows such people to take advantage of her<sup>22</sup>.

Both as a narrator and a character in the novel and in real life, El Saadawi is a psychiatrist from Firdaus’s generation. She was also from traditional origins to the point of having been circumcised.<sup>23</sup> She mentions in many of her interviews and in her autobiographical novel that although her older brother failed at school, he was pampered, allowed to come and go as he pleased, while she herself, though performing well academically, was required to participate in the housework.<sup>24</sup> However, this did not hinder her father from encouraging her to pursue her education, which she did. She continued her father’s legacy, but on her own terms, becoming a successful woman who transformed all her difficulties into opportunities to learn from. She got a degree in medicine from the University of Cairo and a master’s in public health from Columbia University in New York. Later on, she worked with the government and interviewed women prisoners suffering from neurosis in order to conduct a research project, *Woman and Neurosis in Egypt*, which was later published in 1976.<sup>25</sup>

One must look into the circumstances in which El Saadawi wrote her novel, in particular an incident that occurred in her own country. In 1972 she lost her job in the government as director general for public health education because of political pressure, and the regime of her time also closed down *Health*, the magazine that she had founded (1963–1972). In 1981, she became engaged in the politics of her country and as a result was one of over a thousand people imprisoned by President Sadat for criticizing his political policies openly<sup>26</sup>.

El Saadawi describes married women as prostitutes, but she married three times and had two children. She declares that her divorces were the result of her eagerness to pursue her career in the way she wanted and to write about her political, anti-patriarchal, and anti-religious views.<sup>27</sup> She would not let anyone, including her husbands, force her not to write about a particular subject. She

says that she has divorced three men and would divorce the fourth if she were ever to marry again.<sup>28</sup>

### ***Misrepresentation***

One of the most problematical issues of El Saadawi's novel is that she commits a literary stylistic crime against Firdaus in order to prove her point, the same crime that Western scholars and writers committed against the Orient when they misrepresented it.<sup>29</sup> Although this is a story about a woman and is revealed by a woman,<sup>30</sup> even a non-critical reader would notice that, at all phases of her life, protagonist Firdaus seems to have a double personality. On the one hand, she comes off as a crushed child and later a crushed woman, but at times she has a very strong personality. This is because El Saadawi creeps into the character of Firdaus and lets her personality take over Firdaus.

For example, as a child, Firdaus is passive with her uncle in relation to her body and allows him to molest her without a word; she merely describes what her uncle did with detachment, and even comments on how she misses being aroused sexually since she was circumcised:

I paid no attention until the moment when 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 travelling up my thigh with a cautious, stealthy, trembling movement... I closed my eyes and tried to reach the pleasure I had known before but in vain.<sup>31</sup>

However, in relation to other desires, such as education, she expresses them at an early age. She enthusiastically tells her uncle, who is then a student at El Azhar, that she wants to be educated at El Azhar:

I would cry and beg him to take me with him to Cairo. But my uncle would ask, 'What will you do in Cairo, Firdaus?' And I would reply: 'I will go to El Azhar and study like you.' Then he 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.<sup>32</sup>

In another incident that takes place while she is at the secondary school, she develops an attachment to books and reflects awareness in regard to power from the books she has read: "I discovered that all these rulers were men. What they had in common was an avaricious and distorted personality, a never-ending appetite for money, sex and unlimited power."<sup>33</sup>

It is quite strange and truly shocking to find a young lady who had been totally separated from her guardian for as long as six years, educated, and knowledgeable after secondary school returning to passivity. It is strange that she has not developed an independent personality which would give her the



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ability to reject and explain her points and be convincing. Later when her uncle and his wife think about marrying her off to Sheikh Mahmoud, she secretly runs away from her uncle's home as a form of rejection: "When night fell I had not yet found a place where I could spend the long hours until morning. I felt something deep inside of me screaming with panic"<sup>34</sup> She returns at the end of the day, however, and her uncle never finds out what she did. Such silent rejection is no rejection at all. In addition, she never actually describes how her uncle goes about telling her that she was going to be married to Sheikh Mahmoud. It seems that she does not find the whole issue important because of her lack of self-worth! Instead, she says resignedly, "The day came when I departed from my uncle's house and went to live with Sheikh Mahmoud."<sup>35</sup>

Another sign of this double personality is in El Saadawi's description of Firdaus being unable to look at those she is talking to in the face or in the eye, as unable to act decisively, and as speaking lowly of herself, all of which are signs of weakness, low self-esteem, and lack of confidence in herself. For example, when Bayoumi first engages her in conversation, she says, "All the time I kept my eyes fixed on the ground, and did not raise them to look at his face even once."<sup>36</sup> Later, Sherifa, whom she has just met, asks her whom she blames for her misfortune: "Which of them started it? Your father?, your brother...one of your uncles?" ... 'My uncle,' I replied in a low voice."<sup>37</sup> This "low voice" is yet further evidence of low self-esteem.

This double personality is a result of El Saadawi's interest in the story of a real-life woman who was in prison for the murder her husband. She dedicates the first section of the book, eight pages long, expressing her attachment to Firdaus, and telling how the real-life Firdaus allowed both the real-life Dr. El Saadawi and the narrator of the book to talk to her. Therefore, obviously, she manipulates the story of Firdaus and uses it to spread and include her thoughts and ideas related to patriarchy, politics, economy, religion, culture, and social norms.

### ***Misandry***

With her obvious preconceived notion about men, El Saadawi gives herself the right to define masculinity in very negative ways: "I began to search constantly for weak spots in males to console me for the powerlessness imposed on me by the fact of being female."<sup>38</sup> An observation any reader would make about the novel is that every single man she brings up in the story is indecent in one way or another; Firdaus therefore blames every man she meets for every negative situation she is placed in. El Saadawi uses a "one dimensional characterization structure [where she] whole heartedly condemns the male

character and brazenly justifies the female ones.”<sup>39</sup> She does this through several novelistic techniques.

El Saadawi does not allow the story to unravel step by step. The novel's end is at the beginning, and the reader knows her point before she even begins it. At the beginning of her story, Firdaus says, “Each time I picked a newspaper and found the picture of a man who was one of them, I would spit on it,”<sup>40</sup> and she ends part two, which is the bulk of the novel, with this line: “I spit with ease on their lying faces and words, on their lying newspaper.”<sup>41</sup> In both quotes, Firdaus begins and ends with almost the same rhetoric of blame against patriarchy. She generalizes and describes all men as deserving of discredit because they are hypocrites; they are in a position to spread lying rhetoric, since they control the media. One feels that the second quote is simply a rephrase of the first.

Firdaus blames Fathers, uncles, and husbands for being who they are, and for that very reason she has not been a successful human being. She blames her father for her early upbringing and believes that he had totally influenced her future negatively. She blames her uncle for her marriage and blames her husband for being abusive. In his book *I Can See Clearly*, Wayne Dyer (2014), however, argues that blame wastes one's time and does not allow one to achieve one's goals since it depends on the blamed to change.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, Firdaus learns from these men whom she constantly blames. From her father she learns that she need not be a naïve woman; rather, she needs to overcome naïveté lest she live as her father did and be treated as her mother was. From her uncle she learns to read and write and that financial means and status allow one to be powerful in a way that gender cannot. She sees this example lived through the relationship between her uncle and his wife. Her uncle always succumbs to his wife's wishes because she is considered of higher class. From her husband she learns not to be stingy and to be moderate. Of course learning all those lessons involves seeing the flip side of all those people.

It is not right for Firdaus to blame being reduced to prostitution on the men she knew throughout her life. After all, a woman who has received the kind of education she received, who is capable of running away from what she considers home, and who *chooses* to be a prostitute should be able to stand up for her wishes and reveal some character. It is hard to believe that the actions she takes after secondary boarding school—most notably accepting marriage to Sheikh Mahmoud, going home with Bayoumi and even living with him as his woman for a whole year, going home with Sherifa and accepting the role of a prostitute, and choosing prostitution over her office job—are the result of the men of her society.

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While El Saadawi accuses men of discriminating against women, she herself discriminates against men. As a feminist, she should participate through her novel in the attempt “to reduce and eventually overcome this discrimination against women”<sup>43</sup> Her primary goal should be to demand that women be treated equally with men and that women are to receive rights just as men. But one ingredient in this novel is a consistent description of the men—and the other women as well—as lower than Firdaus. It is as if Firdaus were of a different species: El Saadawi describes her as “better than all the men and women we normally hear about, or see, or know.”<sup>44</sup> How therefore can she consider Firdaus a representative of Egyptian women and all the women in the world?

El Saadawi also stereotypes men, portraying them as always functioning negatively towards the female. However, even in the novel this portrayal is not precise; it cannot be, because it is against nature. On one occasion, her father teaches her to work hard to earn money to buy herself some sweets. Her uncle teaches her the alphabet and reads lines of poetry to her, recites the Quran, tells her about his experiences in Cairo, and sings songs to her. So the father and the uncle both show themselves to be human beings with desires and needs, and both are also oppressed by the same system that oppresses Firdaus. So it is unfair to say that Firdaus is uniquely oppressed by the system and that the system is men or patriarchy.<sup>45</sup> Proof of this is that Firdaus’ uncle respects his wife and her wishes. This is because she comes from a rich family, and that is what gives her the power of respect. Firdaus declares, “I sensed that his feeling for her was more one of fear than of love, and that she came from a higher social class than his.”<sup>46</sup>

On the other hand, El Saadawi, through Firdaus, generalizes her ideas about men just because she believes they have a general opinion about women. She commits the crime of stereotyping, which she accuses men of. For example, she thinks it is permissible to insult Bayoumi’s father but not his mother because Bayoumi insulted her.<sup>47</sup> Why does she not think about Bayoumi himself? She should not be insulting either his mother or his father, since both have nothing to do with her condition.

In short, she blatantly overgeneralizes. In the context of her anger at her current state, feeling sorry for herself and attempting to find a way out of blaming herself, she states, “To be a criminal one must be a man.”<sup>48</sup> She considers all the men she has met in her life—and, more to the point, those whom she has not met—as “criminals.” She puts herself in the position of authority after her experience with them, and she punishes them all by murdering the pimp Marzouk. She makes this blanket statement: “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.”<sup>49</sup>

Men surely are not of the same nature as women, but even among themselves men have differences in terms of their beliefs and ethics and practices. For example, while Firdaus is the only one whose guardian does not make it to her graduation party, the majority of parents did make it; they did not oppress or neglect or disparage their daughters; instead, they were happy for their daughters' accomplishments.

Where there is a problem, a solution should be sought. According to the novel, the only solutions available are to destroy every man or to leave this world. El Saadawi fits Daniel's description of "writers [who] bemoan the marginalization of women in the scheme of things [and whose] only solution to this problem is the extermination of the male."<sup>50</sup> In criticizing El Saadawi's solution, Daniel argues that the sexes have been together and complemented each other for centuries.<sup>51</sup> A valid solution could never be to destroy an essential part of the structure of this world: so doing would kill off humanity. El Saadawi's attack on men in general is an attack on humanity and the essence of life.

### ***Choice***

El Saadawi places no blame whatsoever on Firdaus. I argue instead that she is indeed blameworthy. She was not without alternatives to choose from, so she must bear responsibility for the choices she made and the consequent actions she took. Dyer argues that everything that happens to a human being is really his or her choice and that one is considered great when one chooses to personally fulfill oneself when everyone else is choosing madness instead.<sup>52</sup>

There were many moments in the life of Firdaus where she could have taken her difficulties to be opportunities, when she could have made a change in her life and grown. She even does so slightly at times. She says, "I sometimes wonder whether a person can be born twice."<sup>53</sup> The most prominent example is when her uncle and his wife decide to get rid of her by sending her to a secondary boarding school; she makes use of her unchosen but likable new condition by studying hard and excelling at school. Learning provides her with inner happiness and satisfaction. She never thinks about running away from boarding school even though her only guardian, her uncle, never calls or visits her. Furthermore, where she has accepted as normal that her father beats her mother, it is at boarding school that her eyes are opened to the idea that those beatings were abusive and therefore to be condemned as morally wrong. Later, as a wife, she decides to reject such abuse, on every instance running away, first to her uncle's house and later to the street, to live on her own. She makes it her choice to leave and do whatever she needs to do to avoid being physically abused. By running away from her pathetic marriage she also escapes the

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societal norm that allowed for a man to have sex at all times.<sup>54</sup> And when she puts her head to finding a proper job and relies on herself to do so, she finds one that pays just enough to allow her to get by; but at the same time, it is one that she enjoys and one that gives her the self-esteem boost that human beings desire and everyone respects her effort.<sup>55</sup>

However, for most of her adult life, Firdaus does not take her difficulties as opportunities; sometimes she chooses not to choose, and sometimes she makes destructive choices. This makes problematical El Saadawi's argument that men are to blame for everything. On this, Dyer argues that such an attitude is a method of unhappiness which results in one bringing about one's own slavery because it assumes that one has no control over oneself.<sup>56</sup> Firdaus receives a secondary education at a time when not all girls were given such an opportunity, when it was a traditional norm for girls to get married at an early age and therefore not receive a decent education. She describes herself as intelligent: "I had come out second in the school and seventh country wide."<sup>57</sup> She is totally engaged in education as a student, and at school she considers the library her favorite spot. She sits for very long hours and reads about the histories of nations and understands how many leaders were unjust to their people, made choices on their behalf, and therefore led to their destruction. She is old enough to make her own choices, and she knows about the power of a secondary degree because she is a very clever girl; however, this education does not empower her in the novel and does not have a great impact on her future character afterwards.

Evidence for this is throughout the novel. For example, she allows her uncle, who is pressured by his wife, to manipulate her and drive her into a marriage she hates. Upon her first attempt to run away from her uncle's home, she is inexplicably frightened at the sight of one man just looking at her from head to toe. During her marriage to Sheikh Mahmoud, she allows him to constantly disrespect her and to hit and severely injure her. She knows by instinct that his behavior is inappropriate, for she has done nothing to deserve it. When she reports this to her uncle and his wife, the uncle's wife tells her that "the precepts of religion permitted such punishment,"<sup>58</sup> but instead of depending on herself, her instincts, and the knowledge she has acquired at school, and instead of negotiating, she simply surrenders to the words of this woman who wanted her out of her house to start with. She understandably spends the night at the house of Bayoumi the coffee shop owner to escape her husband's abuse, but a few days later she inexplicably allows Bayoumi to sleep with her even though he is essentially a complete stranger. Instead, she could have put up a barrier to show that she was not interested in having sex; she could have requested to work in his café and perhaps get paid, as it would have been a public place to work in. Based on the comforting conversations she has had with her colleague Ibrahim,

she assumes that he is committed to her and therefore allows him to sleep with her. She chooses to go along and live in a hazy world and then awakes suddenly to find out that she has made a huge mistake. Instead, she could have been realistic and stuck to culture and religion here, as it is a taboo for a woman to engage sexually with a man she is not married to. This at least would have enabled her to keep her dignity.

It is hard to accept the idea that Firdaus is representative of the women of Egypt when, after basing her life on ethics for so long, she does not find it difficult to choose to live the unethical lifestyle of a prostitute. Ethics had brought upon her the feeling of respect, and doing what is right had tasted far better than feeling disrespectful. After all, she had chosen to leave prostitution for it in the first place and had struggled to find herself a proper job. It is strange that she does not value her time, effort, and many pleas. On many occasions and throughout the novel, she asks people whom she thinks are fit to help her find a proper job through her secondary degree. To Bayoumi she declares, "Maybe I can find a job with my secondary, or with my primary school certificate."<sup>59</sup> To Sherifa she is hesitant because she is losing hope, since nobody has helped her in that regard, but she still states, "All I have is a secondary school certificate," meaning she would like to find a job appropriate to her educational level. So it is strange how she throws all that away and surrenders herself again to prostitution after she has left it because she often felt guilty while at it, saying "I had to be a respectable woman, even if the price were to be my life."<sup>60</sup> El Saadawi gives us no convincing basis for understanding why Firdaus returns to prostitution. Moreover Firdaus abuses her ability to make choices. Shockingly, she makes a great living out of prostitution, but she treads on her own dignity to do so. There comes a time in the story where she is no longer needy and has the opportunity to live by ethics and standards, but she does not decide to make a decent business and stop prostituting herself. She chooses to make much money and make a dream lifestyle for herself. She chooses her own apartment, her clothing, and which men to sleep with, and she speaks about how she can pay for an abortion, clear her name in the press by paying the reporter, and buy lawyers. She plays by the rules of patriarchy—for after all, is this not what the powerful men of her country do in order to gain their fake reputations? So, not only does she make money so she does not go hungry, but she becomes so rich that she catches the attention of a pimp who is high on the scale in society; he knows lawyers and policemen and very high-profile people who will pay her handsomely to sleep with her, but when the time comes to choose will be on his side and not on hers. She knows how money can be used to buy her a good reputation and to win her law cases.

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Another unethical choice she makes is to accept her death sentence when she has a way out. Feminism focuses on not just critiquing society, but also on not giving up but rather attempting to change women's situations.<sup>61</sup> Firdaus, on the other hand, gives up and surrenders to death, refusing to sign a plea which would save her from death. How can a woman who has the choice of living say that it is due to the betrayal of those she has trusted and all that she has suffered that she wants to leave the earth? The answer to this question is, probably it is due to a psychological problem that she has begun to suffer from and increased with time. If so, then all her explanation could not be accepted as valid. Abdullah, dissenting from this view, claims that Firdaus suffers from hysteria due to the sexual experiences she suffered as a child<sup>62</sup> or she can choose to leave the earth because betrayal and suffering make life less attractive than death. How can a woman who has made so many bad decisions blame her suffering and her consequent preference for death over life on the betrayal of those she has trusted? Is this not simply one more bad choice on her part? While Firdaus declares that she has chosen death that is not true. Were it not for the murder incident, Firdaus would have remained a prostitute and not have decided to take revenge on the world by accepting her death verdict. It is a sentence she receives because she has killed the pimp and stabbed him many times even though he was already dead and because the penalty for killing a human being is death. She does not just kill him in self-defense. Instead, she unleashes her inner satanic desire; she is killing every man as she is stabbing him:

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.<sup>63</sup>

She chooses to undermine her own worth. Whether it is a man or a woman one is dealing with, if one shows them that one is undeserving of respect, and if one does not respect oneself, the other person will sense it and treat one in the way one allows them: "You get treated in life the way you teach people to treat you."<sup>64</sup> El Saadawi builds a character who thinks lowly of her own self and worth and does not articulate her desires. One can grasp that from many of her choices. On the other hand, she complains about the disrespect that she receives from the men of her society who sense her lack of self-respect. For instance, during the time she is at Bayoumi's house, she decides on her own to sleep on the floor when she is offered a choice between the bed and the floor, and she will not even eat any of the food she has cooked—not because it is not tasty, but because she prioritizes Bayoumi over herself. Bayoumi brings in the money, but she cleans, cooks, and shops for house supplies. She chooses to nibble on the head or tail of the fish even though he has not told her to give him her share. If she deals with her own self lowly, how can she expect others to respect her? She

says, "I always left without satisfying my hunger."<sup>65</sup> She never actually grants herself equality with the others even when she does much work to deserve being treated well and to earn something in return. She gives knowledge to the world about herself that it is normal for others to disrespect her and take advantage of her. On this Michel Foucault declares knowledge about a person or thing or situation provides one with power to handle it in the way one wants.<sup>66</sup> Firdaus gave that knowledge about herself to complete strangers; this is her mistake, not the fault of those strangers. However, at the end of the novel she blames her problems on Bayoumi and others to whom she revealed her vulnerability without expecting, let alone demanding, that they respect her.

### ***Readerly***

Roland Barthes would refer to El Saadawi's novel as *readerly*, a product and not a production.<sup>67</sup> El Saadawi wants the reader to consume what she has produced and add nothing to what she reveals. Though well known for her discussions on dissidence and creativity, which she acts upon as she writes this novel, here she wants readers not to be dissident or creative; she wants to impose her opinion and the story she is revealing on to her readers. She wants the reader simply to accept her extremely strong defensive statements in relation to Firdaus, her manipulation of reality, her repetition of dark images, and her choice of the characters' names and her conclusion that Firdaus is the sole victim. Such techniques make her text readerly.

From the beginning of the story, El Saadawi uses the technique of rushing the telling of the story itself and with that imposing every detail of it as truth onto the readers. We find the prison doctor, himself an authoritative figure, commenting on Firdaus by saying, "To be quite honest, I do not feel she is a murderer."<sup>68</sup> The prison warden is also defensive about Firdaus, stating, "Murderer or not, she's an innocent woman and does not deserve to be hanged."<sup>69</sup> El Saadawi herself attempts on many occasions to convince Firdaus to speak to her through the prison doctor and through the warden. Finally, when the time comes and the warden tells her that Firdaus agrees to meet with her, she is extremely surprised and describes her happiness this way: "The sky was blue with a blueness I could capture in my eyes."<sup>70</sup>

El Saadawi manipulates reality, which is really in balance between opposites, to make it appear with little goodness and full of harshness. To achieve such an end, she repeats a lot of negative words, adjectives, and phrases to describe the environment, the atmosphere, and the feelings of Firdaus. All this negative diction drives Daniel to argue that this "seems to reflect the writer's position and immediately give away her preoccupation."<sup>71</sup> She is simply using this technique to magnify incidents and force some color or ideology onto it. For



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example, Firdaus' language and diction is all negative and full of sad tones. She constantly uses words like "drowning," "sinking," "dreaming," "sleeping," "dropping," "swallowed," "pebble," "blind," and "rushing" to describe her feelings of loss. Dyer argues that one controls his or her thoughts by the words one uses and allows ones thoughts to engage with.<sup>72</sup> These words are constantly feeding her thoughts and having a direct influence on her actions and her life.

One can determine the end of the novel, her preconceived philosophy, and her intention from the names of some of the characters. She gives ethical and positive names to both prostitutes, Firdaus (whose name refers to the highest places of heaven, implying that she is a heavenly figure) and Sherifa Salah Al-deen (the first name meaning "honorable" and the last being that of a brave Arab leader). Worst of all, and committing a taboo, she gives the name Mohamaidain, a derivative of the name of the prophet of Islam, Muhammad (peace be upon him), to the young boy with whom Firdaus has sexual encounters while she plays in the fields. I believe that in her choice of names El Saadawi herself is not being respectful to Islam, which, as its name claims, is the religion of peace. How can one expect respect when one is not being respectful towards the other?

### **Conclusion**

Firdaus is condemned to a very sad life and ending in which her guardians and family members play a role. She is sexually, physically and emotionally abused, she resorts to prostitution, and she prefers death over life, but this is not due to patriarchy; rather, I have argued that Firdaus received the means to empowerment in those difficult conditions and circumstances, yet made decisions that did not reveal her empowerment and resorted to blaming men and that was what led to her downfall.

It is true that El Saadawi and her character Firdaus are part of a patriarchal society that is busy trying to simply make ends meet. We find the men more privileged; they have more access to materialistic means and have more access to mobility and more access to education, so they are more able to better themselves and their lives. They thus have the upper hand. On the other hand, El Saadawi manipulates the novel in different ways to serve her agendas; she acts nothing like the protagonist she defends. Her protagonist makes miscalculated decisions at times she could have made decisions that would hold her higher as a human being. Finally, when El Saadawi wrote this novel, her intention was probably to attract attention to the suffering of women due to patriarchy, but with the means she uses to achieve her end she has put fuel on the fire, causing it to continue burning not only negativity but every element that might have been an ingredient for betterment and change.

## قراءة نقدية في "امرأة عند نقطة الصفر" لنوال السعداوي

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### ملخص

النساء حول العالم، وتحديدًا المصريات، قد تم النظر إليهن ولمدة طويلة على أنهن مواطنات من الطبقة الثانية مقارنة بالرجال. لكن هذه الورقة تناقش بأنه من غير الأخلاقي أن تقوم ناشطات نسائيات، وبالتحديد هنا نوال السعداوي، بمناقشة هذه القضية بطريقة متطرفة تضييع الحقيقة. فكراهية الرجال وتحميلهم كامل المسؤولية عن مآزق النساء اللواتي تلتمس لهن الأعداء، بل حتى تمتدحهن على قرارات مدمرة، ليس الحل. إن هذه الورقة تأخذ القارئ خطوة بخطوة لقراءة "امرأة عند نقطة الصفر" للسعداوي لمناقشة المنهجية والعناصر التي وظفتها السعداوي في روايتها ونقدها وبيان أنها منافقة؛ وذلك بأنها تصرح في العلن بشيء وتقوم بشيء آخر على المستوى الشخصي. إنها تسيء تمثيل بطلتها وتشوه صورتها. كما أنها تتركب جرم الكراهية الشديدة للرجل، وهي تخلق شخصية تتخذ قرارات تكون عقبات لها فيما بعد. وفوق كل ذلك فإنها تستخدم الأسلوبيات والتقنيات الأدبية التي من خلالها تحاول فرض وجهة نظرها على قرائها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السعداوي والنسوية والنسوية، اللوم، الاختيار وكراهية الرجل، الانعكاس الخاطي المتعمد

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