

Unveiling Oppression: A Radical Feminist Analysis of *Woman at Point Zero*

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Abstract—This article offers a radical feminist reading of Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, exploring the entrenched systems of patriarchal oppression that constrain female autonomy, suppress sexual agency, and reinforce structural inequalities. Through the life of Firdaus, the novel's protagonist, El Saadawi presents a powerful narrative that interrogates the social, cultural, and institutional mechanisms that deny women control over their bodies and choices. Drawing on the theoretical perspectives of Luce Irigaray, Andrea Dworkin, and Catherine MacKinnon, the study examines Firdaus's experiences with genital mutilation, sexual exploitation, and her eventual turn to prostitution as acts shaped not by deviance but by desperation within an oppressive system. Firdaus's transformation from a passive victim to a defiant figure who reclaims her voice—even at the cost of her life—serves as a critique of the patriarchal structures that reduce women to silence and submission. The analysis highlights the intersection of gender, class, and violence, demonstrating how El Saadawi's narrative challenges dominant norms and offers a space for resistance. By foregrounding Firdaus's voice and choices, the novel acts as a radical feminist intervention that exposes the brutality of gender-based oppression while affirming the necessity of social and ideological transformation. Ultimately, *Woman at Point Zero* transcends its Egyptian setting to resonate with broader global struggles for gender justice, making it a seminal text in both Arab feminist literature and global feminist discourse.

Index Terms—radical feminism, patriarchal oppression, *Woman at Point Zero*, female autonomy

I. INTRODUCTION

Nawal El Saadawi's seminal work, *Woman at Point Zero*, first published in Arabic in 1975, emerges as a compelling portrayal of female subjectivity within a deeply entrenched patriarchal framework. As an esteemed Egyptian physician, psychiatrist, and feminist author, El Saadawi's narrative draws from her extensive interactions with incarcerated women, giving the novel a genuine authenticity mirroring the societal struggles she observed. Beyond a mere individual's narrative, the novel serves as a scathing critique of the systemic oppressions that govern women's existence in patriarchal societies.

Set against the backdrop of 20th-century Egypt, the narrative unfolds through the perspective of a psychiatrist conducting an interview with the protagonist, Firdaus, in a Cairo prison, where she awaits execution for murder. Firdaus recounts her tumultuous journey, beginning in the oppressive confines of a rural Egyptian village, where she becomes a victim of the barbaric ritual of female genital mutilation at a tender age. This harrowing experience serves as a stark manifestation of the patriarchal dominance that governs women's bodies and foretells the unyielding hardships Firdaus will confront throughout her life. Trapped in a loveless marriage marked by abuse, Firdaus eventually flees to Cairo in search of liberation, only to find herself ensnared in a cycle of poverty, exploitation, and prostitution. As she grapples with the limitations imposed by her circumstances as a prostitute, Firdaus recognizes the societal constraints that bind her. In a desperate act of defiance, she murders her pimp, a crime that seals her fate and brings her face-to-face with the ultimate consequence - capital punishment.

Firdaus's journey unfolds as a testament to the pervasive grip of patriarchal dominance, delineating the stark boundaries that confine her autonomy and suppress her agency. With each retelling of her fragmented memories and displays of unwavering defiance, readers are thrust into a narrative woven from the threads of poverty, violence, disillusionment, and an unwavering quest for self-determination. Amidst the harsh realities of oppression and the fervent resistance it elicits, Firdaus's narrative emerges as a powerful call for women urging them to reclaim their autonomy in the face of systemic injustices.

This paper examines the oppression that ruthlessly shapes Firdaus's existence in the novel. Drawing on the insights of radical feminist theorists, it reveals the complexities of her distressing journey, highlighting the pervasive influence of patriarchal structures on women's lives. Going beyond simply understanding Firdaus's story, this paper explores how El Saadawi masterfully utilizes her narrative as a powerful lens to illuminate the struggle for gender equity and social justice. Ultimately, the paper aims to not only expose the harsh realities faced by women within patriarchal systems but also to ignite a critical conversation about the need to dismantle these oppressive structures.

II. RADICAL FEMINISM

This paper employs radical feminist theory to critically examine the sexual experiences of the protagonists in El Saadawi's novel. The choice to analyze the novel through this particular feminist lens is motivated by El Saadawi's own

identity as a radical feminist. As Tugume (2021) elucidates, "(El Saadawi's) writing, informed by her own strand of feminism, is explosive and radical" (p. 119), with the protagonist, Firdaus, echoing the author's critical and radical stance on issues concerning women. This feminist perspective draws heavily from the insights of feminist scholars such as Luce Irigaray, Catherine MacKinnon, and Andrea Dworkin, whose radical analyses of women's sexuality within patriarchal contexts provide a deep understanding of the complexities inherent in the novel. Their perspectives offer profound insights allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the dynamics shaping the sexual lives of the protagonist.

In her article "Luce Irigaray, Radical Feminism, and The MeToo Movement", Nye (2020) states that "Irigaray was one of the pioneers in discussing radical feminist thought" (p. 12). This radical feminist stance appears in most of her works, especially in *This Sex Which is Not One* (1985), where she offers a compelling critique of the historical framing of women's sexuality within what she terms the "phallographic order" (Irigaray, 1985, p. 68). Arguing that women's sexual identity has been delineated through masculine parameters, Irigaray traces this perspective back to Freud's theories, which, in her analysis, systematically strip women of their sexual autonomy. Irigaray contends that Freud's conceptualization of women's sexuality is perpetually tied to the masculine, asserting that it is "never defined with respect to any sex but the masculine" (Irigaray, 1985, p. 69). A pivotal aspect of her argument revolves around Freud's notion of penis envy, a concept that, in Irigaray's view, reduces feminine sexuality to a perceived deficiency, encapsulating it within a framework defined by the absence of the male organ. Irigaray argues that this reduction results in the denial of "specificity" (Irigaray, 1985, p. 69) to the female sex as Freud's theory homogenizes the sexual experience, stifling the unique qualities inherent in female sexuality.

Irigaray's insights offer valuable perspectives on Firdaus's sexual narrative, especially regarding the marginalization of female sexuality within the "phallographic order" (Irigaray, 1985, p. 68). As previously discussed, Irigaray argues that within this order, a woman's sexuality is solely defined "with respect to the masculine" (Irigaray, 1985, p. 69), a concept reflected in Firdaus's experiences. Forced into prostitution, Firdaus's body becomes a mere object of male desire, defined and controlled by the expectations and demands of her clients. Her own desires and subjectivity are rendered irrelevant, stripped away by the very system that dictates her worth solely through the male gaze. This dehumanizing commodification of Firdaus's body echoes Irigaray's critique of the patriarchal constructs that reduce women to objects for male pleasure.

Advancing the discourse on women's sexuality, Andrea Dworkin is renowned as a prominent anti-sex radical feminist recognized for her "uncompromising attitude towards patriarchy" (Addison, 2020, p. 5). Central to her work is the question of female agency within heterosexual sex, as captured in her statement: "the political meaning of intercourse for women is the fundamental question of feminism and freedom" (Dworkin, 2007, p. 156). Dworkin's analysis challenges prevailing narratives that normalize male dominance, particularly within theological and biological frameworks. She argues that heterosexual intercourse is inherently male dominated, with the physical act symbolizing male control and female submission. In her view, intercourse is "an act of possession" where the male body "overwhelms" and "invades" the female body (Dworkin, 2007, p. 79). This perspective directly undermines the notion of sexual liberation for women within a patriarchal system, as championed by sex-positive feminism. According to Dworkin, women involved in heterosexual sex are essentially "occupied" and lack true freedom, a notion she underscores with her denouncing question: "can an occupied people ... be free?" (Dworkin, 2007, p. 156). In essence, Dworkin's radical critique interrogates the very foundations of patriarchal sexuality, urging for a reevaluation of power dynamics and agency within heterosexual relationships.

Dworkin's radical perspective on the power dynamics inherent in sex sheds a crucial light on Firdaus's experiences. In particular, Dworkin's core tenet that intercourse is an act of "occupation" and "invasion" for women (Dworkin, 2007, p. 79) resonates powerfully with Firdaus's narrative. Throughout the novel, Firdaus's body is not hers to control. Her clients view her as a commodity to be used for their own gratification, stripping her of any agency over her sexuality. This aligns perfectly with Dworkin's critique of heterosexual intercourse as inherently male-dominated. For Firdaus, there is no freedom or choice in the sexual encounters she endures. Each interaction is a brutal reminder of her lack of control within a system that prioritizes male desires above all else. Dworkin's analysis thus reveals the trauma inflicted upon Firdaus and the devastating impact of forced prostitution on her sense of self and agency.

Catherine MacKinnon, a distinguished American feminist legal scholar, who collaborated closely with Dworkin in the field of radical feminism, aligns with Dworkin's concerns about power dynamics and sexuality, offering an examination of how these factors intersect with gender construction. Similar to Dworkin, MacKinnon argues that sexuality is not a natural phenomenon but rather a social construct shaped within the male-dominated hierarchical paradigm. Expanding on Irigaray's critique of Freudian theory, MacKinnon delves deeper into the social construction of male power, where sexuality becomes a tool for reinforcing male dominance and female submission. For MacKinnon, "a theory of sexuality becomes feminist ... to the extent it treats sexuality as a social construct of male power: defined by men, forced on women, and constitutive of the meaning of gender" (MacKinnon, 1991, p. 128). She emphasizes the interconnectedness of hierarchy in both sexual and gender discrimination, asserting that "male dominance is sexual. Meaning: men in particular, if not men alone, sexualize hierarchy; gender is one" (MacKinnon, 1991, p. 127). This assertion forms a crucial link in MacKinnon's argument, underlining the fundamental intertwining of male dominance and sexuality. She argues that failing to recognize this link will not only distort the understanding of female sexuality but also "participate in enforcing

the hegemony of the social construct 'desire,' hence its product, 'sexuality,' hence its construct 'woman' on the world" (MacKinnon, 1991, p. 129).

MacKinnon's theoretical framework on sexuality as a social construct of male power offers a powerful lens through which to analyze Firdaus's struggles. MacKinnon's assertion that sexuality is "defined by men, forced on women" (MacKinnon, 1991, p. 128) resonates powerfully with the brutal reality of Firdaus's sexual life. Within the confines of a patriarchal system, Firdaus's body becomes a site upon which male dominance is enacted. Her clients view her sexuality not as an expression of her desires, but as a tool for their own gratification. This constant objectification and violation contribute to Firdaus's dissociation from her own body, a consequence of the profound trauma she endures. Analyzing Firdaus's narrative through this lens reveals how her experiences are deeply intertwined with the power structures that seek to define and subjugate women.

III. FIRDAUS'S SEXUAL STRUGGLE WITHIN PATRIARCHAL CONSTRAINTS

El Saadawi's utilizes Firdaus's narrative as a stark indictment of patriarchal structures that systematically annihilate women's sexuality, manipulating it solely to fulfil the needs of men. From her formative years to the moment of her execution, Firdaus endures a relentless assault on her bodily autonomy. This erosion of agency ultimately leads to a life circumscribed by suffering at the hands of men. Firdaus's experiences thus become a powerful case study, aligning perfectly with the critiques of female sexuality articulated by radical feminist theorists like Luce Irigaray, Andrea Dworkin, and Catherine MacKinnon. Through the lens of these theorists, Firdaus's story transforms into a poignant exploration of the pervasive and destructive influence patriarchal control exerts over women's body and sexuality.

A particularly poignant illustration of Firdaus's ordeal is her account of undergoing female genital mutilation (FGM) as a child. She recounts the traumatic experience with stark simplicity: "Then (my mother) brought a woman who was carrying a small knife or maybe a razor blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from between my thighs" (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 10). The participation of Firdaus's mother in this act further underscores the pervasiveness of patriarchal ideology, where women can be unwittingly complicit in perpetuating its control over other females. This horrific practice serves as a chilling embodiment of Irigaray's concept of the "phallographic order" (Irigaray, 1985, p. 68). Within this framework, female sexuality is viewed as a threat that must be subdued through such barbaric means. Furthermore, the act itself reinforces the notion of a woman's body existing solely for the purpose of male pleasure and procreation, aligning perfectly with Irigaray's critique of female subjectivity being defined in relation to the masculine.

Dworkin's analysis of female genital mutilation (FGM) sheds additional light on the profound impact of this practice on Firdaus's sense of self. Dworkin emphasizes the starkly different meanings associated with male and female circumcision. While male circumcision can signify "higher civil status" (Dworkin, 2007, p. 244), for the female it serves as a brutal marker of sexual colonialization and societal inferiority for females. Dworkin's assertion that FGM "destroys a capacity for sexual response" (Dworkin, 2007, p. 245) resonates powerfully with Firdaus's own struggle to reclaim pleasure after her mutilation. She describes the loss of "the strong sensation of pleasure" that once brought her joy (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 12). Moreover, Dworkin delves into the psychological impact of FGM, arguing that it reflects a form of self-hatred perpetuated by patriarchal structures. This concept is particularly relevant to Firdaus's narrative, as her experiences with FGM and subsequent sexual abuse contribute to a sense of alienation and a struggle to reconcile with her own body. Essentially, Firdaus bears not only the physical scars of FGM but also the psychological weight of a system that seeks to diminish her sexuality and sense of self-worth.

The debilitating influence of patriarchal structures extends throughout Firdaus's life, persistently eliminating her sexual autonomy. Forced into marriage with the elderly Sheik Mahmoud, Firdaus becomes a vessel to fulfill his desires, devoid of any pleasure or agency: "I surrendered my face and my body to his body, passively ... like a piece of dead wood" (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 45). Firdaus's body becomes an object for her husband's gratification, a stark illustration of male dominance within the marital sphere. Seeking escape, she encounters Bayoumi, who further exploits her vulnerability by offering refuge in exchange for sexual favors. Firdaus's internal struggle during these encounters reflects a profound disconnect from her own body. The intense mix of emotions she experiences, oscillating between pleasure and pain, embodies the confusion and alienation that Dworkin argues is a consequence of sexual encounters perceived as a form of "occupation" (Dworkin, 2007, p. 79). Unable to reconcile her emotional state with the physical act, Firdaus becomes a victim of circumstance, caught in a web of manipulation, and forced to surrender her body for survival.

Firdaus's inability to distinguish between pleasure and pain during her sexual encounters resonates powerfully with MacKinnon's exploration of the psychological impact of sexual abuse, a concept crucial for understanding Firdaus's experiences. MacKinnon argues that sexual abuse can trigger crisis in consciousness for survivors, where the body's response to violation can create a sense of confusion and self-betrayal. Women may feel that their body's reactions represent their true desires, conflicting with their conscious understanding of the events as violations. This internal conflict can lead to a dissociation from one's body, a coping strategy reported by many women who have experienced sexual abuse. MacKinnon states:

Many women who have been sexually abused ... report having distanced and split themselves as a conscious strategy for coping with the abuse. With women, this dissociation often becomes a part of their sexuality per se and of their experience of the world, especially their experience of men. (MacKinnon, 1991, p. 147)

This clearly parallels Firdaus's experience with Bayoumi as she says:

I felt the sudden touch of him, like a dream remembered from the distant past, or some memory that began with life. My body pulsed with an obscure pleasure, or with a pain that was not really pain but pleasure, with a pleasure I had never known before, had lived in another life that was not my life, or in another body that was not my body. (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 48)

Firdaus's words capture the essence of dissociation during a sexual encounter. The "obscure pleasure" she feels is intermingled with pain, creating a sense of confusion and unreality. Her reference to a "distant past" or "another life" underscores her emotional detachment from her body in the present moment. This emotional disconnect aligns with MacKinnon's assertion that dissociation can become a coping strategy for survivors of sexual abuse as stated above. Similarly, Firdaus's reflection on her uncle's abuse reveals a profound sense of alienation: "It was as though I could no longer recall the exact spot from which (pleasure) used to arise, or as though a part of me, of my being, was gone and would never return" (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 12). The permanent loss of pleasurable sensation signifies the lasting impact of the abuse and reinforces the concept of dissociation as a way to manage the trauma.

Firdaus's experiences with Bayoumi demonstrably contribute to her disillusionment with patriarchal structures. He subsequently manipulates her into prostitution, highlighting the vulnerability of women within a patriarchal society. This exploitation serves as a catalyst for her descent into a world where her body is primarily commodified, stripping away any sense of agency. Later, Firdaus enters a relationship with Ibrahim, marking the first time she willingly engages in a sexual relationship. While Ibrahim offers a temporary relief, his ultimate betrayal shatters Firdaus's illusions of trust and love, further solidifying her disillusionment with men and her return to prostitution. Her declaration – "a successful prostitute was better than a misled saint" (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 89) signifies a pragmatic adaptation to her circumstances. She prioritizes self-reliance and survival over societal ideals of female purity.

Firdaus desperately claims she chose prostitution freely, but this hides a deeper fight within her. This belief in control empowers her, making prostitution seem better than the limited life society offers. For Firdaus, it is a way to take charge after years of abuse and societal control. However, Meston and Buss's (2009) evolutionary framework, centered on the concept of "sexual economics," offers a contrasting perspective. This framework posits the mating market as a system where women, informed by an understanding of men's sexual psychology, can utilize their sexuality for financial gain (Meston & Buss, 2009, pp. 308-309). Within this context, Firdaus's decision to become a prostitute transcends a simple act of free will. It becomes a strategic adaptation necessitated by the limited options available to her within a patriarchal society. While Firdaus may perceive her choice as one of empowerment, a closer examination reveals the constraints imposed by the very system she is attempting to navigate.

Furthermore, Firdaus's debilitating experiences as a prostitute leads her to reject the traditional distinction between marriage and prostitution. She recognizes the underlying power dynamics that position men in a dominant role and control over women's bodies in both institutions. Firdaus expresses this disillusionment when she observes: "I discovered that all these rulers were men. What they had in common was a greedy and distorted personality, a never-ending appetite for money, sex, and unlimited power" (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 25). This recognition leads her to believe that all women, regardless of marital status, are ultimately servicing men's sexual needs. That is why she chooses to become a "free prostitute rather than an enslaved wife" (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 94). This choice highlights the restricted agency afforded to women under patriarchal structures, forcing them into situations where even rebellion takes the form of navigating a system designed to limit their options.

Firdaus's blurred distinction between wives and prostitutes aligns demonstrably in Dworkin's radical feminist critique. Dworkin challenges the traditional distinction between the roles of women in marriage and prostitution and highlights the shared subjugation that underlies both. She contends that the fundamental purpose of both the wife and the prostitute is to perpetuate male power and dominance, characterizing male sexual domination as a form of "sexual colonialization" across various societal institutions, including marriage (Dworkin, 2007, p. 245). This resonates with Firdaus's experiences, where she perceives men, regardless of their social standing, as driven by an insatiable desire for power and sex. Dworkin strengthens her argument by referencing the American famous sexologist, Alfred Kinsey. As Dworkin illustrates, Kinsey's research suggests a blurred line between marriage and prostitution, making it difficult to distinguish "between the most obvious sort of commercialized prostitution and the relationships of every husband and wife" (as cited in Dworkin, 1989, p. 39).

Additionally, Irigaray's perspective on prostitution adds another layer to Firdaus's struggle, specifically regarding her shattered agency. Irigaray challenges the notion of sex work as a potential form of empowerment, instead portraying it as a manifestation of usage, exchange, and the reduction of a woman's nature to a mere vehicle for relations among men. Drawing on a Marxist analysis, Irigaray characterizes prostitution as an exchange of a woman's used body, with its value determined by the extent to which it has served men. She argues that "the qualities of (the prostitute's) body are 'useful.' However, these qualities have 'value' only because they have already been appropriated by a man . . . The woman's body is valuable because it has already been used" (Irigaray, 1985, p. 186). This is tragically evident in Firdaus's experiences. Through the Irigarayan lens, Firdaus's body becomes a commodity, its value determined by its history of use by men. Marzouk, the pimp, exemplifies this when he declares, "my capital is women's bodies, and I don't mix work and love together" (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 96). Clearly enough, Firdaus's journey as a prostitute becomes a poignant illustration of societal dynamics that objectify and restrict women's bodies.

It is worth noting that El Saadawi's powerful portrayal of prostitution through Firdaus's story has been praised for its feminist message, but it also sparked debate. Some critics argue her view is too extreme and might downplay the choices of some women in prostitution. For example, Tarabishi (1988) believes El Saadawi exaggerates Firdaus's suffering and paints an unfairly dark picture compared to other prostitutes' experiences. He even proposes that Firdaus chooses prostitution as a means of combatting men, employing a Freudian perspective to suggest that her actions symbolically undermine men, driven by her deep hatred of men (Tarabishi, 1988, pp. 17-23). This critique is supported by passages where Firdaus expresses anger towards men as she once declares:

I became aware of the fact that I hated all men, but for long years had hidden this secret carefully. Men that I hate most of all were those who tried to give me advice or told me that they wanted to rescue me from the life I was leading. I used to hate them more than the others because they thought they were better than I and could help me change my life. (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 91)

Evidently, El Saadawi's portrayal of Firdaus offers a powerful social critique. However, Firdaus's intense anger towards men raises questions about the completeness of the story. Women's experiences within patriarchal structures are complex, shaped by a multitude of factors that influence their choices. Focusing solely on Firdaus's perspective might overlook this broader picture. A more comprehensive understanding necessitates including a wider range of female voices to explore the interplay between societal pressures and individual choices that impact women's lives.

To sum up, Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* offers a compelling exploration of the pervasive and destructive influence of patriarchal structures on women's body and sexuality, particularly through the lens of Firdaus's narrative. The novel unveils the brutal methods used to regulate and suppress female sexuality, from female genital mutilation to the commodification of women's bodies in prostitution. Firdaus's journey serves as a poignant illustration of the complexities and contradictions inherent in navigating a patriarchal society, where even acts of rebellion are constrained by societal norms and expectations. While El Saadawi's portrayal of Firdaus has sparked debate regarding the extent of agency afforded to women within such systems, it undeniably underscores the urgent need for a deeper understanding of the multifaceted dynamics shaping women's experiences. Ultimately, *Woman at Point Zero* stands as a powerful testament to the resilience and defiance of women in the face of systemic oppression, urging readers to confront and challenge the patriarchal structures that continue to shape the world.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper provides a thorough examination of El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* through the lens of radical feminism. By employing the radical theoretical frameworks of Luce Irigaray, Andrea Dworkin, and Catherine MacKinnon, the paper delves into the intricate dynamics of patriarchal control over female sexuality and agency, as meticulously depicted in the novel. Firdaus's harrowing narrative serves as a powerful testament to the profound and often devastating consequences of patriarchal oppression on women's bodily autonomy. These consequences range from the enduring trauma of female genital mutilation to the commodification of women's bodies within the context of prostitution.

The novel's exploration of Firdaus's journey serves as a potent reminder of the pervasive influence of patriarchal structures that seek to regulate and subjugate women's bodies and desires. Firdaus's experiences starkly illuminate the realities faced by countless women. This illumination underscores the urgent need for sustained feminist resistance and systemic change. Through Firdaus's story, readers are confronted with the grim realities of gender-based violence, economic exploitation, and systemic inequality. This confrontation prompts critical reflection on the ways in which patriarchal norms shape understanding of power, identity, and agency.

Ultimately, *Woman at Point Zero* stands as a powerful work that compels readers to critically engage with and interrogate the systems of power and oppression that continue to shape the world. The novel forces readers to confront uncomfortable truths about gender dynamics and compels them to critically examine the status quo. By bringing these issues to light in such a stark and unflinching manner, El Saadawi encourages critical reflection and critical action towards dismantling structures of inequality.

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