

Recontextualizing Resistance in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*.**Dr. Anju.E.R**Assistant Professor of English
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Abstract

The Middle Eastern writer, Nawal El Saadawi explores the unpleasant experience of women in the male dominated Egyptian society. Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* exposes the oppression and emancipation of women from the patriarchal social milieu. The paper focuses the resilient and revolutionist attitude of the protagonist Firdaus in her strives towards claiming freedom from the clutches of the society.

Keywords: Emancipation, patriarchal, milieu, resilient, revolutionist

The world has come a long way from the primitive age and the human being is believed to have become civilized and more advanced in their thinking, developing and use of sophisticated gadgets. But it is found that treatment of women from the beginning is still the same as before. The fall of women began with the fall of man. Women are still persecuted believing that with the eating of the forbidden fruit, sin and the wrath of god entered the life of man which cannot be rinsed, ever. Further the belief registered permanently in the minds of people that women are the epitome of disobedience and giving them importance can lead to the doom of all mankind. It is astonishing to note that not only

in a particular place, region, country, continent, religion or a particular culture but the whole world considers women as a weaker sex and a threat to the male dominion.

But the question arises as to why would any woman decide to revolt against her life, home and the society? Every woman is expected to humble herself not only in front of god but the most supreme: man. Her life revolves around her husband, children and home. If truth be told, a woman is never expected to outshine the man. The man is believed to be strong, intelligent, one who can do jobs that requires physical strength. But a woman on the other hand is believed to be timid, gentle, and vulnerable and one who is best in house hold duties. A woman is expected to live with a man, for a man and by the grace of man. In the Indian context it is identified that a woman must be first dependant on her father when she is a child, then on her husband when she gets married and on her son in her old age. But a question still persists as to what happens if the woman does not beget a son. The answer is given by Sukumari Bhattacharji “If she failed to deliver sons for twelve years she could be discarded with scriptural sanction, as a mother of still born children after fifteen years, and as a barren wife after ten years”(36). Things get even more complicated in the 18th and 19th century India where the widowed women were forced to jump in the funeral pyre of the husband. But the men were free to marry again to safe guard the family lineage.

In European countries the only thing that burdens the parents of girl child is marriage. The girls spend more time in making themselves pretty and attending balls so that they would be liked by some good gentle men and they can be made into a good wife and proud mother of many children. If anything goes against the usual set up, say a girl is not married or decides to do something else other than the provincial lifestyle then she is looked down

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upon. World War I and II brought a great change in the lives of many women across the world. The war brought in destruction of land, property, economy and human force. Many young men who once had also assumed the role of fathers, husbands, brothers, fiancées and sons lost their lives leaving the women folk and children stranded without bread winners in the family. It became mandatory for women to go out and economically safe guard the family. The women who had never experienced the tough male dominant society had to compete just to survive. They took up odd jobs even the tough jobs done by men. They worked as mechanics, tilled the soil, joined defense forces and slowly got themselves educated. This was the huge turning point for women as they started to realize that they are no lesser than men. That's when the women started to protest and demand for the equal rights and acknowledgement of their identity in the society.

The free thinking concept is accompanied with education, first hand experience of the real world, and the instinct to survival. When a woman is educated, she starts thinking differently and understands that she does not just exist but she can live with a purpose. She starts thinking and seeks her own space. When this happens, it becomes a threat to the male pride. She is thwarted and brought down with the only weapons - to control her physically and sexually. But men fail to understand that a woman can be controlled physically or sexually but no one can control her mind which soars high and dreams and desires of the good things that she is deprived of all her life. If she dares to fulfill her dreams or seek her space then she is bound to be left alone. When she is left alone things become even more difficult. A respectful life does not come easy for a woman. A lonely woman seeking

freedom, respect and success is too much to ask for. She will have to let go of them just to survive. Her survival rests on her decisions.

Thus in the novel *Woman at Point Zero*, the protagonist Firdaus makes some of the decisions that changes her life upside down. She flees from every relationship trying to find love and comfort, finding disappointment, she strikes back, and creates a life where there is money and her individuality though she loses her self respect and becomes the product in demand. The author strongly focuses on the hypocritical society where women are only meant to suffer and the only protesting voice which is subdued in death. Firdaus is the example of all those women who are the victims of the patriarchal society. Being a woman she under goes a series of trauma which makes her rigid and cold. Her experiences with her parents, with her uncle, as a married woman, trusting so called kind people, working as a hardworking working class woman, as a prostitute and betrayed in love, teaches her so much that at one point she does not fear death but hate men to an extent that she desired "...to lift my hand and bring it smashing down his face" (10). It is not just hatred that drives her but her desire to make it big. "All my life I have been searching for something that would fill me with pride, make me feel superior to everyone else, including kings, prince and rulers" (9).

It should be understood that Firdaus is from a very small village in Egypt and conceptualizing such outrageous and farfetched thoughts cannot creep into a mind from nowhere. The seed of this desire was sown by her uncle who would sit with her and tell her his tall tales about life in Cairo and his experience in university he studied. These things create in her to be with her uncle and go to the university and study. And as fate would have

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it, she is taken to Cairo after her mother's death by her uncle where she is sent to school. The girl is good at studies and when her uncle gets married she is put to a boarding school.

Firdaus was different in her thinking and action. She had seen so much in her life that makes her only hope for a better future. She conveys:

... and I spoke of my hopes for the future.... If I had something to say, therefore it would only concern the future. For the future was still mine to paint in the colours I desired. Still mine to decide about freely, and change as I saw it fit...I imagined that I would become a doctor, or an engineer, or a lawyer, or a judge...I kept imagining myself as a great leader or head of state.

I knew that women did not become heads of state, but I felt that I was not like other women, nor like the other girls around me who kept talking about love, or about 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 stuck me as trivial. (24-25)

From the above passage it can be made clear that Firdaus was an ambitious kid. She wanted to achieve the world and she knew that education is the only source through which she can fulfill her dreams. She was not like the girls of her age. She already has bitter experience staying with her uncle and love and marriage becomes trivial matters to her. She is very good student who is always engrossed in books. She would spend a lot of time in the school library. She exposes:

I developed a love for books, for with every book I learned something new. I got to know about the Persians, the Turks and the Arabs. I read about the crimes committed by kings and rulers, about wars, people, revolutions, and the lives of revolutionaries... I preferred books written about rulers.

...I discovered that all the rulers were men. What they had in common was an avaricious and distorted personality, a never-ending appetite for money, sex and unlimited power. They were men who sowed corruption on the earth, and plundered their peoples, men endowed with loud voices, a capacity for persuasion, for choosing sweet words and shooting poisoned arrows. (26-27)

It becomes clear that education makes way to several discoveries of human life and psychology. Firdaus realizes that the norms that are created are only for women and not for men. A man is allowed to do as he wishes yet claims to be the man of god and a true “patriot”. She also gets familiar with the hypocritic society which is corrupt and male dominant. She realizes that she can make a difference to the society if she is given a single chance, but all she gets is scorn, betrayal, hate and non-acceptability. It is quite ironical to find that the male characters in the novel are all well educated but are unimaginably prejudiced and orthodox. Since inception of the mankind, man has dominated the world. Education at one point of time became exclusive for men. Women were not given the opportunity thinking she would realize her importance and would demand her status. And if that happens there would be no balance in life. Many theologians have included norms and rules especially for women to control them using god and spiritual ways as their bait. The

idea of education opening the mind wide open does not seem to work with men as it makes them conceited and power hungry.

There are many examples in the novel which explains the psyche of male sex. Her husband who is a sheikh feels that she is a property that he owns for himself. There is no love between them; he never considers her as a human being at all but a mere unpaid servant who must oblige his bidding. There is her uncle who laughs at the idea of his niece studying in a university which is only meant for men, “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 laugh and explain that El Azhar was only for men” (14-15).

The so called kind hearted Bayoumi who beats her when she demands to be given job on the basis of her secondary school certificate “that night when Bayoumi came home, I said, ‘I have a secondary school certificate, and I want to work.’ ... but he jumped up and slapped me on the face,” (52). The author sarcastically points out that the woman however much she tries to liberate herself from the bonds of the society, she is forced to remain in the shell of bondage and reminded of her subordinate position in the society.

It turns out that studying is the only best thing that ever happened to the character. Firdaus is not allowed to study further instead she is married off. The girl shows her protest in the only possible way that is by running away. She thinks that by running away she can leave the past behind start her life anew. The escaping strategy only shows that she is not ready to stay in a place bonded for the rest of her life where she will be beaten up, sexually violated, made to prostitute herself with the men she is asked to. She wants to be free and to

be able to make her own choices. The choice is to escape and she does escape before the marriage and after the marriage but each of her escape leads her to another trap or another type of bondage. She falls in the trap of the sweet talks of Bayoumi who promises her a new life by finding her a job but instead he tries to possess her like any other man. As education makes human gain knowledge of the world, experiences teaches a human the ways of the world. The character's escapades teach her to make choices in her life. When she met Bayoumi, he asked her a question "Do you prefer oranges or tangerines?"(50). This question unknowingly stuck Firdaus quite deeply that it became a turning point in her life.

No one had asked me before whether I preferred oranges or tangerines. My father never bought us fruit. My uncle and my husband used to buy it without asking me what I preferred. As a matter of fact, I myself had never thought whether I preferred oranges to tangerines, tangerines to oranges. (50)

This was the most important thing in Firdaus' life that ever happened to her. The reason is that this very incident, though it may seem quite insignificant, changes her perception of her life. In the later part of her life, after much betrayal, she decides to rebel in full form in the only possible way: she makes her own choices. She decides whom she would prostitute with and in doing so she made herself the product in high demand.

A prostitute always says yes, and then names her price. If she says no she ceases to be a prostitute. I was not a prostitute in the full sense of the word, so far from time to time I said no. As a result my price kept going up. A man cannot stand being rejected by a woman, because deep down inside he feels a rejection of himself. No one can

stand this double rejection. And so every time I said no, the man would insist. No matter how high I raised the price he could not stand being refused by a woman. (97)

From the above description it is clear that Firdaus has analyzed an average man's psyche which cannot stand the triumph of a woman. So she challenges the male ego to an extent that he comes back again and again pleading and begging to be accepted as the boss. The act teases and taunts the male pride which she relishes.

Meeting the pimp Sharifa Salah el Dine is another experience that teaches her to respect for what she is, a woman; and be proud of the profession that she is about to be a part of, a prostitute. The conversation between the pimp and Firdaus below throws some light on what the pimp is really made of.

Sharifa: 'Everybody has to die, Firdaus. I will die, and you will die. The important thing is how to live until you die.'

Firdaus: 'How is it possible to live? Life is so hard.'

Sharifa: 'You must be harder than life, Firdaus. Life is very hard. The only people who really live are those who are harder than life it self.'

Firdaus: 'But you are not hard, Sharifa, so how do you manage to live?'

Sharifa: 'I am hard, terribly hard, Firdaus.'

Firdaus: 'No, you are gentle, and soft.'

Sharifa: 'My skin is soft, but my heart is cruel, and my bite deadly.'

Firdaus: 'Like a snake?'

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Sharifa: ‘Yes, exactly like a snake. Life is a snake. They are the same, Firdaus. If the snake realizes you are not a snake, it will bite you. And if life knows you have no sting, it will devour you. (57-58)

The society and her encounter with the real life has made the pimp smart, tough and a fighter. The pimp understands that Firdaus is vulnerable and eventually be made in to a prostitute in one or the other way, so she tries her luck proposing her to join the club. Firdaus is mesmerized by the bitterness and toughness in the woman and obliges. The character feels indebted to the pimp and let her self go in the hands of the pimp. She reveals the amazement through these words: “I became a young novice in Sharifa’s hands. She opened my eyes to life, to events in my past, in my childhood, which had remained hidden to my mind.”

Firdaus did not regret for her choice of being a prostitute. This was her way of protesting against the society which expected her to be a wife in the form of a prostitute who is void of any respect or importance.

Yet not for a single moment did I have any doubt about my own integrity and honour as a woman. I knew that my profession had been invented by men, and that men were in control of both our worlds, the one on earth and one in heaven. That men force women to sell their bodies at a price, and that the lowest paid body is that of a wife. All women are prostitutes of one kind or another. Because I was intelligent I preferred to be a free prostitute, rather than an enslaved wife. Every time I gave my body I charged the highest price. (99)

Firdaus was a rebel in the orthodox, conservative, conventional and patriarchal society. The society respected people with money and power. Though prostitution is not a respectable profession anywhere in the world, but Firdaus brings respect, power and money under her feet. Her clients do not force her instead they plead and beg offering more money for her services. She became the lord of her life not depending on men instead testing their patience which only intimidates them.

Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* talks about the prostitutes and according to her:

The man may perhaps think he 'has' her, but this sexual possession is an illusion; it is she who has *him* on the much more substantial economic ground. Her pride is satisfied.... Her pleasure cannot be in any sense 'inflicted' upon her; it will seem rather to be an extra benefit; she will not be 'taken', since she is being paid. (582)

A man may feel proud of himself of one thing that he is being a man and the other being able to enjoy sex. It also intimidates them finding a woman enjoying it as they do. In the novel one can find that the men force the protagonist in sex and keep asking the question as to whether they enjoy it. The very question angers Firdaus who lies that she does, just to shut them up and irritate them. "...often the man would hear it and mutter stupidly in my ear, 'Do you feel good?' In answer I would purse my lips and prepare to spit in his face... (61)". "Do you feel pleasure?" he repeated...I...said, 'Yes. ' He sank his teeth into the flesh of my shoulder and bit me several times... while he was biting me, he kept on repeating: 'slut,

bitch.” (53) Firdaus never enjoyed the encounter instead she made them believe that she can equally enjoy as the men.

There are two reasons as to why she does not enjoy the sex, one being as any woman in Egypt Female Genital Mutilation was performed on her devoiding her of any pleasure all her life. Another reason is the sexual act that is not invited or when sex becomes a profession, woman closes her emotions turning her body into a machine. Through this she prevents the intimate act to reach her mind, soul and spirit. “I kept my eyes closed and abandoned my body. It lay there under him without movement, emptied of all desires, or pleasure, or even pain, feeling nothing. A dead body with no life in it at all, like a piece of wood, or an empty sock, or a shoe (53). Simone also talks about how woman as a prostitute lett go of their body and not get carried away by taking things at heart in her book *The Second Sex*. “In general, however, the woman is cold when professionally at work. Some of them feel towards the whole group of their customers nothing but indifference, tinged with contempt (576).

When considering prostitution as a profession which is against the law, even a respectable, honest and hard working woman cannot survive the pressure of the work place which has its temptation through the higher officials. Firdaus faces similar problems in the work place in order to earn respect. She is offered many tempting goodies and position for one night stand with the higher officials. But Firdaus realizing her importance as a woman and as a prostitute does not succumb to the requirements of her colleagues.

Throughout those three years not once did a top executive or higher official so much as touch me. I had no wish to humiliate to my body at a low price, especially after I had become accustomed to being paid very highly for whatever services I rendered. I even refused invitation to lunch, or drive along the Nile...every time one of the directors made me a proposition, I would say to him, 'It's not that I value my honour and my reputation more than the girls, but my price is much higher than theirs. (82)

To what extent would any one go in order to protect their individuality, honour and freedom? Murder? And if the person does kill then it is mandatory in analyzing the state of mind and attitude of the person. A woman is considered gentle and vulnerable but she is also a human being with all the humours of life. The society cannot accept a woman to have the power to do the cruelest deed of killing because she is weak and gentle. The conversation between Firdaus and a prince who is also her customer reveals his perception about women in general when she tells him about the murder.

Prince: 'Did life teach you to kill?'

Firdaus: 'Of course it did.'

Prince: 'And have you killed anybody yet?'

Firdaus: 'Yes, I have.'

He stared at me for a brief moment, he laughed and then said, 'I can't believe that some one like you can kill.'

Firdaus: 'Why not?'

Prince: 'Because you are too gentle.'

Firdaus: 'And who said that to kill does not require gentleness?'

He looked into my eyes again, laughed, and said, ‘I cannot believe that you are capable of killing anything, even a mosquito.’(108)

Firdaus is quite aware that she is with a prince but to her he is just a man. In order to prove that she is not afraid of any thing, she hits him hard and threatens that she is not scared to kill him as well.

Firdaus: how can I convince you that what I say is true?

Prince: I do not really know how you can do that.

So I lifted my hand high up above my head and landed it violently on his face.

Firdaus: now you can believe that I have slapped you. Burying a knife in your neck is just as easy and requires exactly the same movement.’

This time, when he looked at me, his eyes were full of fear.

I said, ‘Perhaps now you will 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. (109)

The above conversation reveals the hatred of Firdaus towards men. Firdaus is a free prostitute who does the business on her terms and conditions. When she encounters a male pimp Marzouk who wanted to take control of her life and her career, she panics that her freedom is at stake and she kills him. The act of killing is the climax of the novel revealing that in desperation to retain her freedom, Firdaus fights back with vigour, and her survival instincts leads her to kill him.

The conversation between Firdaus and the pimp makes her desperate, thinking that she would be trapped for the rest of her life, living off the mercy of the pimp, with the sheer intention of saving her neck she kills him.

Firdaus: 'I don't want to be anybody's slave.'

Marzouk: 'And who says there is anyone who is not someone else slave? There are only two categories of people, Firdaus, masters and slaves.'

Firdaus: 'In that case I want to be one of the masters and not one of the slaves.'

Marzouk: 'How can you be one of the masters? A woman on her own cannot be a master, let alone a woman who's a prostitute. Can't you see you're asking for the impossible? ... You will never leave' ... 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 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 belly. I stuck the knife into almost every part of his body. (103-104)

It has to be noted that an astonishing change has occurred in Firdaus towards the end of the novel which reveals the dark side of a woman. Firdaus at one point of time was at the receiving end of blows and beatings. She was the one who usually gets beaten up and she never had the nerve to strike back and she herself tells the reason to be fear. In the course of this rough life she shuns her fear and does what she always wanted to do. She is no longer scared of anyone or anything. One can find Firdaus in a new avatar where she not only hits

back but does not hesitate even to kill. The transformation in the protagonist from a simple girl who does not have strength to talk for herself raises to become a rebel in full form mazes the readers.

This chapter deals with the cause of the rebellious nature in women which have a disastrous effect in the end. Firdaus, a small town girl rebels against the society in a way that she not only becomes a prostitute to have money and all the good things in life but in the end she kills a man to sustain her freedom. In the end she is convicted of murder and prostitution and sentenced her to death. The system is ready to grant her pardon but she is not ready to accept it because she feels that she would keep on killing men who would try to take advantage of her and instead, if she dies, she can be at peace.

The article thus tries to explore the complicated psyche of a woman who is left alone but who is also trying to make it big knowing quite well that being a woman and getting into a profession of prostitute can cost her honour and even her life. But to achieve her desired life she has to fight and be always at war every second of her life for her survival. The researcher has tried to find the reason for her revolt, how she revolts, and the result of her revolt. It can be found that reason for the revolt could be education, experience of the person and the instinct to survive; the protagonist revolted by escaping from her problems and the people, became a prostitute and killed a man; the result of her revolt is that she is eventually killed. According to Shefali Moitra:

Women protesting against male oppression is not new what is new is their focus of attack. The uniqueness of the present protestation is that women are not merely

talking of political, economic and religious changes of the sort that all the oppressed of the world would like to see. They are talking about a change at a level that has hitherto not been identified as pernicious. The changes that are being sought are those relating to a male bias, a bias caused by a patriarchal attitude, which engulfs all of our thoughts and actions. (1)

Shefali portrays the reason for the revolt of the women as, “What we find in patriarchy is a legitimization of hierarchy, exploitation and violation through which women are systematically subjected, disempowered, silenced and marginalized. Each one of these above mentioned consequences is an outrageous violation of woman’s right and freedom” (2). Nawal El Saadawi too stresses the necessity of freedom and equal rights to women through her character Firdaus. She even presents the resisting attitude of her character as a struggle of a caged bird that tries to free itself from the clutches which curtails its basic nature and needs. Thus Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero* epitomes the longing of a woman to breathe the air of freedom and enjoy her existence.

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