

## Depiction of Women as the Primary Architects of their own Oppression: A Masculinist Critique of El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the presentation of women oppression and emancipation in Nawal El Saadawi's novel, *Woman at Point Zero*. The novel is specifically a call and an appeal to the women in her Egyptian society and the world at large on the need to revisit their activities and contribution toward the oppression, suppression, molestation, and brutality of their fellow women. Nawal El Saadawi presents with unique clarity, the unpleasant experience women are subjected to in her male-dominated society (Egypt). The novel aesthetically captures the oppression, sexual harassment, domestic aggression, and intimidation that the Egyptian women are subjected to in her patriarchal social milieu. Through a Masculinist study of the text, this paper not only submits that women create a conducive atmosphere for the unhappiness of their own kinds but also subverts the author's proposition of the way forward for the Egyptian women who are disenchanting under the atmosphere that is besieged with unfair treatment of the women. This essay unambiguously argues that El Saadawi's understanding of women emancipation from the persistent violence on the women is outrageously momentary and unsatisfactory. Indeed, the novel has succeeded in subverting the stereotypical representation of the women as weak, passive, and physically helpless yet, the cherished long-lasting emancipation expected from her oppressed women could not be fully achieved. The novelist portrays a resilient and revolutionary heroine whose understanding of women liberation leaves every reader disconcerted. The paper examines the oppression that the heroine, Firdaus suffers from men and her fellow women and how she eventually achieved a momentary emancipation.

**Key words:** Emancipation, Masculinist, Nawal El Saadawi, Oppression, And Patriarchy

### INTRODUCTION

Through the lens of the Masculinist approach to literary analysis, this paper is preoccupied with the examination of matriarchal oppression of women which engenders the ideological stance of Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*. A logical, justifiable and comprehensible portrayal of women oppression and emancipation in an essentially patriarchal society of Egypt requires a thorough articulation of Egyptians' socio-cultural lives and the synthesis of Islamic jurisprudence with the culture of the Egyptian people. As the issue of "Women Liberation Movement" is remarkably generating contemporary scholarly attention, the new perspective focused on in this essay will be of tremendous significance to the academics, researchers and the general readers who have a genuine interest in the contemporary literature of the Afro-Arab community.

Nawal El Saadawi is among the most prominent African feminist writers, an internationally celebrated controversial African female novelist, a renowned medical practitioner who has meritoriously served as a physician, psychiatrist

and human rights activist. Her creative writings include non-fiction, short stories, dramatic literature and prose fiction. With the successful completion of her medical college, in the course of her service as a medical practitioner, in her medical research conducted in Kanatir Women Prison, El Saadawi discovered that women oppression by their fellow women, female inter-gender oppression, and oppressive cultural practices are responsible for the women's physical and psychological problem (El Saadawi, WPZ, 2015). Nawal at the early years of her medical practice becomes the Director at the Ministry of Public Health. In Nawal El Saadawi's most controversial publication *Women and Sex* published in 1972, she unsparingly exposes the various oppressive acts perpetrated on women (El Saadawi, 1972). As a way of checking the excesses of her expository and confrontational writings, the Egyptian government disengaged Nawal El Saadawi from her various appointments ranging from her position as the Chief Editor of a Health Journal, as an Assistant Secretary General of the Egyptian Medical Association and finally, as the Director in the Ministry of Public Health. Her disengagement from various appointments rekindles her

energy as a controversial feminist rather than dampening and crippling her morale. Since her dismissal, El Saadawi has been seen prolifically devoting her creative works towards exposing the wrongs done to the women. She thus reveals with unique clarity, the hierarchy of oppression the Egyptian women are subjected to. El Saadawi aesthetically portrays how women in her geographical milieu are doubly oppressed and molested firstly, by their fellow women and then, the men as evidently captured in her novel, *Woman at Point Zero*.

Nawal El Saadawi is particularly disturbed as to why the women constitute the greatest obstacles to the happiness and fulfillment of their fellow women. In an interview with Adeola James, Emecheta also reveals that over the years, the bulk of the women unhappiness has been largely caused by their fellow women. She remarks: "Half of the problems rest with women, they are busy bitching about one another such that when changes are suggested, our women don't like it" (James 1990:36). More so, it could be said that women oppression as evidently presented in El Saadawi's novel is sown in the home by the women, watered and harvested by the society. The idea that the emergence of female oppression begins in the home by the mother is amply popularized by some feminists like Flora Nwapa Quoted in James (1990) that "The oppression of the women starts in the home" (James 1990: 136). Similarly, men are not also left out in the oppression and suppression of the women. Since the novel, *Woman at Point Zero* focuses primarily on exploitation, intimidation and sexual harassment of the women, Malti-Douglas (1991:137) describes the novel as: "a searing feminist indictment of male-female relation." Essentially, Malti-Douglas strongly affirms that men also play a crucial role in the oppression and molestation of the women. With the aforementioned oppression of women emanating from both patriarchal and matriarchal perspectives, the novelist, El Saadawi reveals the primary reason for her writings. While citing El Saadawi, Alkali (2012:14) observes that 'Nawal El Saadawi confesses to the initial purpose of her writing as inspired by anger. She claims to write in order to release her anger. 'What angered me most, she writes, "were oppression: oppression of women and oppression of the poor." It is with this spirit of anger that El Saadawi presents bluntly and indiscriminately the oppressive situation the women are forced to live with in her male-centered milieu. Since women oppression and molestation are perpetrated by both the women and the men in an essentially male-dominated society, it thus becomes very glaring that women's emancipation in this society might be difficult to achieve. Observing the unpleasant atmosphere in which most African women live, one of the most prominent African female writers, Aidoo (1973) opines: "There is no difference then. No difference at all between the white men and their apes. So, it should be easy now to see that there have never been people to save anybody but themselves, never in the past, never now and there will never be any savior if each will not save himself. No savior, only the hungry and fed" (p. 15). The heroine of El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* is constructed along this background. She perennially suffers the turbulence of

oppression and molestation from both patriarchal and matriarchal powers before her pathetic and unjustifiable execution by the authority.

## OPPRESSION

Before discussing the novel under study taking into consideration the issue of oppression of women, it will be essential to attempt defining some of the major concepts like oppression and Masculinity. Scholars have distinctively viewed the word "oppression" from different perspectives. For instance in Barker's view, "oppression" is described as "the social act of placing severe restrictions on an individual, group or institution. Typically, a government or political organization that is in power places these restrictions formally or covertly on oppressed groups so that they may be exploited and less able to compete with other social groups. The oppressed individual or group is devalued, exploited, and deprived of privileges by the individual or group which has more power" (Barker, 2003).

Johnson (2000) in his definition of oppression remarks: "for every social category that is privileged, one or more other categories are oppressed in relation to it. The concept of oppression points to social forces that tend to press upon people and hold them down, to hem them in and block their pursuit of a goal in life. Just as privileged tends to open doors of opportunity, oppression tends to slam them shut." (Johnson, 2000:39). From every perception we may try to ascribe, oppression generally has to do with the relationship of exploitation and domination culturally, socially, economically and psychologically. In this paper, therefore, the word "oppression" will be viewed as an unjustifiable use of power either openly or covertly with persistent injustice and cruelty that makes the victim feel troubled and discontented (Mohammed, 2010).

## THE MASCULINIST THEORY

Chinweizu in his "The Masculinist Dissection of Female Power" has amply revealed the fact that it is the woman and not the man that is the more dominant and more powerful of the two sexes. He reveals forcefully that the woman's power is the "invisible six-seventh of an iceberg compared to the visible one-seventh which is the man's" (Chinweizu, 1990). Chinweizu goes further by stressing that "In human society, it is not male power but the female power that is supreme this is attributed to the fact that according to him "men may rule the world, but women rule the men who rule the world" (p. 4-5). With this enormous power of the women, it becomes very obvious that the basic requirements for the attainment of full emancipation of the women would be re-appraising themselves and their activities. The premise of this theory is that since women have so much power at their disposal if put into beneficial use, women's liberation from all the forces of oppression and degradation could be achieved. This is incidentally the message which El Saadawi craftily presents in her chosen novel, *Woman at Point Zero*.

## DEPICTION OF WOMEN AS THE PRIMARY ARCHITECTS OF THE OPPRESSION OF OTHER FEMALES

El-Saadawi's major concern in her creative works is, focusing passionately and uncompromisingly on certain aspects of lives of the men and women which consistently cause unhappiness and displeasure to the existence of other females. Some of these issues include the practice of female genital mutilation or female genital cutting. The protagonist in *Woman at Point Zero*, pathetically reveals the cruelty with which she is treated in her childhood days by her mother when she asked her how she begot her without a father, because based on her immaturity and childish mentality, the person whom she refers to as her biological father resembles other men "so closely that it was difficult to tell" her real and natural father (*WPZ*, P. 13), and due to this childish interrogation which in reality should have given the impression of the heroine's childishness and irrationality to the mother, Firdaus informs us how her mother takes an astonishing, resentful and savage action that is to permanently hinder her of some pleasure in life: "First she beat me. Then she 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" (*WPZ*, p. 13). This act of savagery is very oppressive and detrimental to Firdaus existence. Firstly, it makes Firdaus to remorsefully cry of pain and agony all night, it also robs the heroine of her freedom because the mother denies her the opportunity "to go to the field to play with the other girls, climb over the water wheel and swim with the boys in the stream" (*WPZ*, p. 13-14). Firdaus remorsefully expresses her displeasure for being deterred from playing with a little boy called Mohammadain. She remembers how they both, in a small shelter made of some maize stalks play bride and bridegroom. She also reveals that in their course of playing, Muhammadain is found of touching some parts of her body which usually arise a sensation of sharp pleasure in her. And whenever the little boy, Mohammadain is not with her and she desires this pleasure, she simply feels for the same spot and immediately this is done "the moment I touched it, I would realize that I had felt the sensation before" (*WPZ*, p. 14). With the brutal removal of this highly cherished flesh from her body, Firdaus laments that the strong sensation she used to feel has instantly disappeared.

This revelation of the heroine is indeed an expression of remorse and bitterness by an oppressed female who has been ferociously denied the joy of sexual pleasure for life. And depriving the heroine the sensation of sexual pleasure is synonymous to depriving her of her entire life; for nothing else can excite her entire body, send tremor down her spine to the minutest cell of the composition of her body other than that "piece of flesh" which has been removed from her body. Ironically, it is bewildering, therefore, that it is the woman and not the man who is responsible for inflicting this act of savagery on her daughter. Firdaus sees her mother's conspiracy with the woman surgeon as a means of oppressing her by brutally subjecting her to their decadent practice. The heroine pathetically unfolds: "they cut off a piece of flesh from between my thighs" with an impression of being oppressed

by her mother and the woman surgeon in particular and all other females who support the practice in general.

More so, as theorized by Chinweizu, women in the course of misusing their hidden power create an atmosphere of oppression, dehumanization, brutality and subsequent destruction of their fellow. These negative utilization of female powers have ways of determining or restructuring the life of the affected females. What Firdaus in *Woman at point Zero* becomes can be largely attributed to the misuse of the hidden powers by her uncle's wife. Before his marriage with his wife, Firdaus's uncle showed her compassion and cared for her needs because she was an orphan and she has been living under his guardianship in his house. With the emergence of the wife, the situation dramatically changes for Firdaus. She is first sent to the boarding school uncared for, and after completion of her secondary education, she goes back to her uncle's home but sadly discovers that things are now in shambles. Firdaus' aunt enquires from her husband about his plans for Firdaus and in response, he affirms compassionately: "She can stay with us until I find her a job" (*WPZ*, p. 35). But this unequivocal answer receives a mischievous response from the wife "that could be for years. The house is small and life is expensive. She eats twice as much as any of our children...we don't need her" (*Ibid*). El Saadawi employs a bit of satire in her course of presenting scandalous and unjustifiable activities of women which engender perpetual unhappiness and molestation to their fellow. The novelist sadly reveals that a woman would set another woman on the path of destruction simply because of food of which she is not even the sole-provider. This woman is set to use her hidden power as theorized by Chinweizu to create a conducive atmosphere for the oppression, suppression, molestation and subsequent death of her fellow, the heroine. She has made up her mind to send away Firdaus from her home, the woman promptly remembers her uncle, Sheikh Mahmoud "...a man who is thrice older than Firdaus age and, moreover, suffering from a sickening facial deformity" (Tarabishi, 1988, p. 20) turns out to be the most befitting man simply because Firdaus eats double of what each of her children eats. And because Sheikh Mahmud is a man of high financial status who can conveniently meet her financial requirements, she quickly opts for him. "If I speak to him I am sure he will agree, I intended to ask him for a big dowry....A hundred pounds or perhaps even two hundred." (*WPZ*, p. 37). It should be observed that the activities of the wife are in consonance with the Masculinist theory of Chinweizu which says that woman is the more powerful of the two sexes. Though more superior and powerful is this woman, rather than channeling her hidden power to beneficial use, she uses the power to put her fellow woman into a perpetual subjection. In virtually every matter that affects the home, her decision is the more superior and the final. In this marriage arrangement, she takes it upon herself to dictate not only the man whom the heroine must marry but also to decide the amount to be paid as the bride price as the tradition demands; a duty that is the exclusive preserve of man's and in spite of this, her most preferred husband for the heroine is what Tarabish describes as "this ugly, disgusting husband whose malodorous lips ooze blood



and pus ...” (Tarabishi, 1988, P. 21), a man so means that; “He never went out of the house... lest he be obliged to pay a few piasters for a cup of coffee” (*WPZ*, p. 44). More so, the heroine, Firdaus also experiences brutality and oppression in her unfortunate marriage which she is forced into by her uncle’s wife. The husband, Sheik Mahamoud is portrayed as a very malicious and heartless husband who mercilessly beats up Firdaus on the realization of some remnant of food in the rubbish bin. The heroine’s married life with her husband is marked by misery, frustration, and discontentment. When she returns from her uncle house where she has gone to seek his intervention after been brutally battered by her abusive husband, the husband becomes more aggressive and violent towards her. She sadly states:

He later leaped on me like a mad dog. The hole on his swelling was oozing drops of foul-smelling pus. I did not turn my face or my nose away this time. I surrendered my face to his face and my body to his body, passively, without any resistance, without a movement, as though life had been drained out of it... On one occasion he hits all over me with his shoe. My face and body became swollen and bruised... One day, he hits me with a heavy stick until the blood ran from my nose and ears. So, I left. But this time I did not go to my uncle’s house. I walked through the streets with swollen eyes and bruised face. (*WPZ*, P. 46-47)

Indeed, the above is an expression of discomfort and displeasure in the marital affair that the heroine is forced into by her uncle’s wife. This disgusting person is the best partner that her uncle’s wife could find for her. The husband who could heartlessly battered Firdaus on the realization of some leftover crumbs of food in the bin until she bleeds. Firdaus as evidently presented through the plot of the novel lives as a pariah. Consistently, in every encounter she had with both men and womankind, she experiences one form of molestation or the other. And when she has had enough frustration and dehumanization from her abusive husband, she plans to leave to an unknown destination where she could probably secure employment with her secondary school certificate. In Firdaus’ search for employment, she encounters another ‘wolf in sheep clothing’, Bayoumi the coffee shop owner. Firdaus’ encounter with Bayoumi is another oppressive and hostile experience for the heroine as it provides the atmosphere for her oppression, suppression, molestation and sexual harassment. He changes the naïve Firdaus to a mere sex object and a prostitute because apart from his sexual exploitation of the heroine, he comes home with some members of his gang to sexually assault her. This predictable oppressive and unpleasant situation of the heroine would have been avoided were it not for the aunt’s misuse of her hidden power. She suffers savagery and brutality in all her encounter with both men and women alike. All the brutality, molestation, and sexual harassment that the heroine suffers could have been avoided if her uncle’s wife has put her hidden power into a beneficial use as theorized by Chinweizu. Bayoumi at first appears to be very modest, compassionate and sympathetic towards the battered Firdaus. He pretentiously provides her with food, new clothes and a conducive place to sleep. The same Bayoumi is later seen savagely beating and consistently taking advantage of sexual gratification on

her. He also brings other men who pay him money to satisfy their sexual desire with her at night. She miserably narrates her unpleasant experience: “He took to locking me in the flat before going out. I now slept on the floor in the other room. He would come back in the middle of the night, pull the cover away from me, slap my face, and then bear down on me with all his weight. I kept my eyes closed and abandoned my body... Then one night his body seemed heavier than before, and his breath smelt different, so I opened my eyes. The face above me was not Bayoumi’s” (*WPZ*, P. 66-67).

Indeed, through the examination of the plot of the novel, it becomes evident that the heroine life is miserable and agonizing. In every encounter she has had with the men, she is battered, sexually assaulted, psychologically traumatized and degraded to nothingness. The readers are left bewildered and stupefied when Bayoumi’s friend, after satisfying his sexual desire with Firdaus, sinks his teeth on her shoulder, hits her consistently on the breasts and on her belly while at the same time insulting her and her parents (*WPZ*, p. 67). Little wonder that the heroine, Firdaus sadly remarks that: “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” (*WPZ*, p. 88).

Furthermore, oppressive activities of women on their fellow women is also evidently captured in the Firdaus’ relationship with Sharifa Salah El-Dine. After Firdaus’ escape from the morally bankrupt Bayoumi and his gang, the heroine unknowingly enters a much more detrimental trap of Sherifa Salah along the road. Without any iota of shame, Sherifa Salah reveals her cruelty and wickedness towards her fellow human beings, she unfolds that though she has a very soft skin “but my heart is cruel, and my bites deadly” (*WPZ*, p. 54). And in reality, she is seen using and exploiting the innocent girl by unjustly luring her to prostitution. Firdaus is sexually exploited by exposing her to sexually aggressive men who could pay any amount to satisfy their lustfulness with her. Despite the fact that Firdaus earns no financial benefit, she astonishingly and regrettably discovers that she could never have a moment of rest except while visiting toilet to ease herself. According to her “day and night, I lay on the bed, crucified, and every hour a man would come in for they were all married, all educated, all carrying swollen leather bags, and swollen leather wallets in their inner pockets” (*WPZ*, p. 57). The oppressed and exploited Firdaus is never aware of the amount her exploiter, Sherifa receives from each of the men that she has served.

It should be observed that Firdaus begins to get conscientized of her sexual exploitation under Sherifa when Fawzy, one of her regular customers informs her that Sherifa is only exploiting her by informing the innocent Firdaus not to hamper the progress of the business with pleasure while she reaps all the benefits of the heroine’s sexual exploitation. This thoughtful assertion of Fawzy sensitizes Firdaus to temporarily quit prostitution under her pimp, Sherifa. She finally leaves Sherifa’s residence with only a few clothes

so as to return to her profession as one of the highest paid prostitutes in the city. The argument of this paper, therefore, is that all the unpleasant and traumatic experiences of the heroine are brought to bear heavily on the heroine through the outrageous and oppressive activities of the women. Firdaus's miserable life would have been avoided were it not for the misplacement of priority through unjustifiable use of hidden power by her aunt. All these traumatic experience that Firdaus undergoes are as a result of the wrong choice of husband for her by her uncle's wife. Meanwhile, it is now unequivocally clear through the foregoing discussion that although all the traumatic experience and oppression of the heroine are perpetrated by both the women and the men, it is the women who prepare the conducive atmosphere for the oppression and subjugation of their fellow women. The important point at this juncture is that the heroine would have been saved from her hopeless predicament if her fellow women have put their hidden power to beneficial use.

#### EMANCIPATORY EFFORTS OF THE HEROINE IN *WOMAN AT POINT ZERO*

The emancipatory effort is observed in the action and reaction of the heroine in different segments of the narrative as she encounters her oppressors. El Saadawi in her attempt to empower and emancipate her oppressed female character portrays a resilient and educationally ambitious heroine whose primary preoccupation right from childhood is university education. Often at the end of his vacations from school, Firdaus' uncle will set off for the city where he is a student at El-Azhar University. And as she walks along with him on one of his return journeys, she tells him of her wish to also go to El-Azhar University to study like him. He laughs suddenly at her ignorance and explains to her that "El-Azhar was only for men" (WPZ, p. 16). At this unsatisfactory response from her uncle, Firdaus begins to ponder as she walks back home. Rhetorically, some pertinent questions came simultaneously: "Who was I? Who was my father? Was I going to spend my life sweeping the dung out from under the animals, carrying manure on my head, kneading the dough, and baking bread?" (WPZ, p. 16) begin to make themselves manifest. Particularly of importance is the fact that she revisits those chores given to her by her mother. On getting back home, she tells us that "I stared at the mud walls like a stranger who had never entered it before. I looked around almost in surprise, as though I had not been born here; but had suddenly dropped from the skies, or emerged from somewhere deep down in the earth to find myself in a place where I did not belong", appraising the "self" Firdaus' eyes have suddenly opened up and she begins to see things she had lived with without knowing or questioning why she had to live a life such as that. Her unique ambition for acquiring university education and the questioning of the laborious and oppressive life that she lives, form parts of the heroine's emancipatory efforts.

After being driven into the profession of prostitution by Sherifa, we are informed through the plot of the novel how awareness comes to the heroine in the course of her profession as a prostitute. Before this stage in her life, she has been

sexually exploited by Bayoumi and his gang and then by Sherifat and when she escaped from her house, policemen and ordinary men on the street exploited her sexually without pay. But her status as a prostitute changes dramatically when she meets a cultured man who paid her the sum of ten pounds for her time, the amount she has never received from any mortal since the inception of her profession as a prostitute. Her expectation from her customers is usually some pennies or at the very most a pound. She tells us that as she grabbed the ten pound notes between her fingers, she felt "as if he had lifted a veil from my eyes, and was seeing for the first time" (WPZ, p. 64)

This stage of awareness is very important in order for her to appraise her status as a practitioner of prostitution. With the mind unveiled as it were, Firdaus states with the boldness that even in the midst of the darkest night "...I was no longer afraid. Nothing in the streets was capable of scaring me any longer..." (WPZ, p. 61). This confidence and, indeed, the boldness that suddenly overwhelms Firdaus speak volumes. El Saadawi here seems to be suggesting that the greatest opportunity that will avail an oppressed woman the desired emancipation is economic or financial independence which the heroine, Firdaus has yearned for through her readiness and determination for the pursuit of university education. Suddenly, she feels liberated from a bondage position. She feels that she has been re-born anew because her mind and body were hers to do with as she pleases: "...and myself became really mine, to do with them as I wished" (WPZ, p. 68). The heroine informs us further of her present status as a liberated woman, "Now I could decide on the food I wanted to eat, the house I preferred to live in, refuse the man for whom I felt an aversion no matter what the reason. And choose the man I wished to have, even if it was only because he was clean and well-manicured" (WPZ, 68-69). It becomes very obvious now that a hundred of the likes of her uncle's wife would not be able to compel her to marry anyone that is not of her choice again. At this point, it is very significant to state that Firdaus has been able to temporarily emancipate herself from the forces of oppression and dehumanization which she has been forced to live with.

Additionally, Firdaus as an employee of a big organization determines to earn respectability for herself within the company because as a former prostitute, she had lived a life of molestation and abuse and within a short time; she earns the much-desired self-respect and "was considered one of the best employees in the company." (WPZ, p. 77) Although she got respectability for herself, it did not come easy because she did not allow any top executive or higher official to sexually exploit her because, as she states: "I had no wish to humiliate my body...I even refused invitations to lunch, or to a drive along the Nile" (WPZ, p. 75). All these efforts were necessary in order for Firdaus to re-write her unfortunate past. As already stated above, she was dragged into prostitution by Sharifa, a woman old enough to be her mother for when Firdaus asked who she was at their first meeting, Sharifa simply replied "your mother". (WPZ, p. 53). In other words, it will be true to say that as a mother-figure she betrays the naïve Firdaus and drags her into the world of prostitution for her selfish interest. Also, at the time that she is a

prostitute, Firdaus does not realize the ugliness of what she is into until one of her customers Di'aa tells her to her face "you are not respectable" (*WPZ*, p. 70). It was as a result of this simple statement that she says goodbye to prostitution and decides to prove to herself, if to nobody else, that she can attain the desired self-respect and dignity.

At this point, it is quite clear that Firdaus has been able to re-appraise herself even as a prostitute and has taken her fate into her own hands to successfully change her status in the eyes of a society that considered her dirty and perverse. She has been able to emancipate herself, albeit for a short while, from a profession that she has felt enslaved her. It is this same confidence in her that pushes Firdaus to kill the pimp who extorts money from her just as she summons the courage to slap the rich prince hard in the face. This two actions by Firdaus show that when sufficiently determined, a woman can be a threat to men in the same way and manner that she is to her fellow women. It is important therefore to state here that the message which such determination and, indeed, results pose before us is far-reaching. It says a lot about the general oppressed status of women. It says much about the fact that women are capable of changing their fortunes and statuses in life cannot be overemphasized. It may be true that Firdaus returns to prostitution, but the return in itself, signifies an appraisal of deeper mind, a show of choice and freedom and a quest for the desired and lasting emancipation. In other words, having attained the much-cherished respectability, Firdaus' discovery that other female employees oblige the high executives for no pay at all, except perhaps a little rise in their salaries, a daily ride in their big cars or even for a mere lunch out, forms an important part of her decision. It is at this point when she compares her past life as one of the most highly priced prostitutes in Cairo to the cheap "prostitution" going on in the offices that she again opts for her former life. This second appearance on the scene becomes very voluntary and calculated. It portrays Firdaus as a woman who knows what she wants and in spite of all consequences, goes out to do just that. Such determination is what women require to effectively change their oppressed status within the society.

One major disturbing aspect of El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* is the way the novelist sets her protagonist on the path of destruction. Although El Saadawi has portrayed an assertive and rebellious character in her heroine astonishingly, the desired long-lasting emancipation expected of such a vibrant character from her oppressors is scandalously denied. In order to ensure justice and fairness to the heroine over the murder she committed, there is the need for the synthesis of the peoples' culture, religion and the prevailing constitution of the Egyptian society. Unarguably, in any civilized society, killing another human being is a criminal act and must be condemned absolutely. However, in every civilized culture, religion or socio milieu, a man who commits murder while defending or protecting his life against another who tries to murder him has the full protection of the law in both Islamic jurisprudence and the conventional constitution. Through the plot of the novel, El Saadawi clearly reveals how Marzouk, Firdaus' pimp shockingly and unjustifiably extorts money from the heroine. And when the

heroine tries to free herself from this persistent extortion by quitting prostitution, Marzouk is seen savagely sounding a deadly blow on Firdaus' face and when the aggrieved Firdaus retaliated, Marzouk brings out a knife in his possession to stab and murder the heroine. It is in the process of bringing out the knife to murder the heroine that Firdaus quickly seizes the knife from her pimp and repeatedly stabs her oppressor with the same knife. It becomes very glaring that Firdaus murdered her pimp while defending herself from being brutally murdered by the pimp. Firdaus reveals the incident that provokes her committing murder. She unfolds that as she tries to leave prostitution to go in search of employment:

I caught hold of the latch of the door to open it, but he lifted his arm up in the air and slapped me. I raised my hand even higher than he had done and brought it down violently on his face. The whites of his eyes went red. His hand started to reach for the knife he carried in his pocket, but my hand was quicker than his. I raised the knife and buried it deep in his neck, pulled it out of his neck and then thrust it deep into his chest, pulled it out of his chest and plunged it deep into his belly. (*WPZ*, p. 130)

It is unequivocally clear that Firdaus murders Marzouk, her pimp while defending herself from being brutally murdered by the same pimp. In whatever perspective we view it, whether in the conventional constitution or in the Islamic jurisprudence which the Egyptian society uses, the heroine is entitled to the full protection of the law. The readers are left bewildered when El Saadawi creates an unfortunate situation in which the heroine has to be executed simply because she has succeeded in killing a man who has attempted terminating her life. Taking an intrinsic and extrinsic look at the circumstances surrounding the murder committed by the heroine, her untimely execution is outrageous and unjustifiable. More so, the emancipation achieved by the heroine after murdering her oppressor is too momentary and unsatisfactory.

## CONCLUSION

El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* is a compendium of artistic representation of how people especially women treat their fellow women in Egypt. Indisputably, her novel reveals that women oppression in her Afro-Arab community of Egypt is hydra-headed. Their oppression emanates from their home under the leadership of their mothers, from their matrimonial home by their husbands, also by the security agent and the ordinary men on the street, and finally, their fellow women. El Saadawi's novel unequivocally raises the question of who to be indicted as the primary architect of the oppression of women in her male-dominated society of Egypt? The novelist thus takes a critical look at the overall contribution of the women towards the oppression and molestation of other females. As we have observed from the foregoing discussion, it can arguably be stressed that the heroine has been perennially oppressed by both the women and the men. However, the heroine's oppression by both sexes, her life of prostitution, her sexual harassment by both ordinary men and the secu-

rity agent on the street, her oppression in her marital home, and finally, her unavoidable act of murdering a pimp would have been avoided if her fellow women, her uncle's wife, and Sherifa Sallah have used their hidden power for the good of the heroine. Therefore, Firdaus' unfulfilled life, her life of savagery, molestation and abuse can generally be attributed to the misuse of the hidden power by her uncle's wife and partly, Sherifa Salah El Dine, the woman who lured her into the world of prostitution. Hence, through the intrinsic and extrinsic examination of El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, this paper strongly submits that it is the woman and not the man that assumes the role of the primary architect of women oppression and subjugation. Therefore, Nawal El Saadawi uniquely portrays woman's oppression primarily from matriarchal point of view.

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