

**Cultural Subjugation and Traumatic Effect on Women in the African Society:  
A Critical Approach to Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero***

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**Abstract**

*Many critics have written about women in African novels and the roles they play. Some argue in favour of the fact that in novels written by men, women are not regarded as important parts of the society while others are of the opinion that women are regarded based on the tradition of the people. Therefore, discrimination against women in African traditional societies starts from the day the female infant steps into the world. In many cultures, sons enjoy greater importance than daughters because they are the ones that can perpetuate their lineage while daughters are married off to perpetuate other family's lineage. Today, the women's argument remains that they are still far from achieving equal treatment with their men counterparts in all spheres of human conduct. In fact, the novelists even more than the men and every other woman writer in Africa today, sees education—a fundamental— as the most potent means of women's liberation. Their heroines are free and fulfilled in direct proportion to the extent of their learning. Education gives women a vision of human experience beyond narrow confines of their lives and the effects of its denial can be seen in the lives of some of the characters. The Egyptian, Nawal ElSaadawi, the critic, "has written *Woman at Point Zero* to show the ostracism and hatred of women in Arab world provoking inhumanity. ElSaadawi in the novel, advances the theme of education, portraying the kind of education that the girl-child receives in the Arab world as waste. Saadawi is of the opinion that parents and the educational system pay lip service to human values, equity, work and freedom. The researchers examine the traditional view of women in the society, especially among men's folk. The theoretical framework used is cultural Feminism. Cultural feminism refers to the separatist idea that women innately possess an evolved essence, which distinguishes them from men; giving them societal advantages that culture at large has historically qualified*

as weaknesses. Cultural feminists believe that a woman's perspective should receive more credence. Critics argue that cultural feminism relies too heavily on the "essentialist" tenets of society's gender binary. Cultural feminism retreated to vanguards, working instead to build a women's culture. Some of these efforts had some social benefit: rape crisis centers, for example; and of course, many cultural feminists have been active in social issues (but as individuals, not as part of a movement). As various 1960s movements for social change fell apart or got co-opted, folks got pessimistic about the very possibility of social change. Many of them then turned their attention to building alternatives, so that if they couldn't change the dominant society, they could avoid it as much as possible. That, in a nutshell, is what the shift from radical feminism to cultural feminism was about. These alternative-building efforts were accompanied with reasons explaining (perhaps justifying) the abandonment of working for social change. Notions that women are "inherently kinder and gentler" are one of the foundations of cultural feminism, and remain a major part of it. A similar concept held by some cultural feminists is that while various sex differences might not be biologically determined, they are still so thoroughly ingrained as to be intractable. But the central source of thoughts, research, and findings in this paper will always be the author's novel and literary works well-known and established in the world of literature.

**Keywords:** Rape, Sex, Harassment, Exploitation, Subjugation

## Introduction

Literature has become part and parcel of the rich heritage of any viable and worthwhile society. It is now widely regarded by many scholars and authors as artists explore the society from time immemorial and in different climes around the globe. This literature has continued to fulfill its own unique function in national development. As Ngugi Wa Thiong's rightly says in *Homecoming*

Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum. It is given impetus, shape, direction, and even area of concern by the social, political and economic forces - in particular and economic forces in a particular society. That the relationship between literature and these other forces cannot be ignored especially in Africa where modern literature has grown against the gay background of European imperialism and its changing manifestations (16).

So, no society can significantly exist without its literature. To Romanus Egudu in *Modern Afrtrectit Poetry and Africa Predication*; "literature is a mode of expression. It is not just a subject that expressed something, but rather it is the way, manner or method in which something is said or written" (8). Therefore, literature as a creative art has been subjected

to varying degrees of functions and usage. Hence, the writer becomes a satirist who could never avoid the temptation of chronicling the various incidents happening in his society at large.

The general acceptable notion is that literature mirrors the society. But literature, as can be deduced from the present ideological trends does more than mirror the society. It does not just give us the picture of our lives alone but goes further to suggest ways of improving ourselves. Literature is the private and public awareness given to both the individual and the society respectively, through the exposure of the hidden or open truths that people seem to be ignorant of.

In other words, literature revolves round man and his environment as it understands and interprets human beings and aims at correcting the ills in the society by first identifying their ills and providing solutions. Obi Maduakor says:

Literature has become an important means of understanding and interpreting human beings and aspects of society such as politics, religions, economic, social conflicts, class struggle and human conditions through the medium of language.

Literature ridicules for the purpose of correcting. Literature is known for rewarding virtues and punishing vices. These virtues are the morals we learn as we often times think about our own lives and how best to make amends before it's too late. Ugwu also said that "literature is any work or writing that has an ending value and of universal interest touching on themes such as religion, government, romance, politics and science (1).

Literature explores the culture of the people. It is a form of art which involves performance in words. It can be realistic or idealistic, oral or written. In *English Usage for Higher Education*, Cornel Ujowundu states that:

Literature is any kind of imaginative composition in prose work which aims at expressing feelings, telling a story, impacting an idea or conveying an expression through a special use of language (359).

This shows that literature is the study of man in the society and also the vicissitudes of life. Achebe in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, adds that:

If an artist is anything, he is a human being with a heightened sensitivity, he must be aware of the faintest nuances of injustice in human relations. The African writers cannot be unaware of or indifferent to the monumental injustice which his people suffer (79).

He believes that the writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done for he is after all, the sensitive point of his community. Helen Chukwuma in her work, *Accents in the African Novel*, says that:

The novelist is the conscience of his age. He manifests a high sensibility in the individual in society and scoops out those aspects of the system that shake and intimidate him from which he has no relief. He shows a sharp-consciousness of the events of here and now, the world of today. His responsibility as a writer is to make his readers more aware of their environment and the attendant problems (39).

Furthermore, Ngugi in his *Writers in Politics* states that:

Literature cannot escape the power structure that shapes our everyday life. A writer has no choice whether or not he is aware of it, his work reflects one or more aspects of the intense, economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society. What he chooses is one or the other side in the battle field. The side of his people or the side of those social forces or class that try to keep his people down (8).

In other words, a writer's theme is influenced by the experiences of his age, his work reflects either the economic, political, cultural or ideological struggles in his society.

In the African society, women were consistently bruised and brutalised by oppression. This was mostly imposed on them by their male counterparts. Women were regarded as the weaker vessels and also as sex objects and political pawns in the games played by men. Two evidences are seen in the beginning of creation as recorded in the Bible, in the sense that God created the first man (Adam) before he created the first woman (Eve). The implication of this is that man is seen as the lord and hero to the woman. According to Ebere Ezenweke in her book *A Hindrance to Women Potentials* "women have suffered tremendous marginalisation and show of superiority complex in the past. A traditional orientation of many cultures of the world testifies to this assertion" (2). In this regard, she indicates that women's problems vary in the impact of negative cultural practices. In the same vein, Nworgu Patrick in regard to Ebere Ezenweke's claim emphasises that:

Educationally, women are discriminated against. Parents prefer to send male children to school to the exclusion of the girls ... In the traditional society, women are not allowed to control their hard-earned income. It is considered normal for wives to hand over the hard-earned money to their husbands for proper control, disbursement or safekeeping. If the woman dares raise an objection to such unholy practice, she is maligned, cajoled and criticised as a social misfit. Such a woman may stand the risk of being sent packing (74).

From this view, women are helpless in the society because they are rightless and voiceless due to the cultural practices of the past which still constitute serious conflicts and tragedy

in our contemporary society. In fact, this is a societal tragedy whereby a child is beaten and at the same time prevented not to cry. All through history, the oppression of women is invariably constant, a part of global dilemma, ageless, systematic and deep rooted. Truly embodied within the economic, cultural, political, social and ideological global attention and becomes the subject of numerous investigations. However, Ezenweke posits that:

Extensive local, national and global network of women have succeeded in putting women's concerns on the global agenda. Notwithstanding such positive development, women are still grossly discriminated against. Decision making and a relentless epidemic of violence against women and girls continue to wreak havoc in every corner of the world. (36)

Nmah Paul in his book *Women's Right in Igbo Land* states:

Igbo women, like the majority of Africa's population, are subject to inequalities in the political, social, economic and cultural fields. Women's attitudes to their traditional roles have varied from acceptance that has tended to condition the non-utilisation of formal guarantees of equality (4).

In this regard, Igbo women's rights in the society are disadvantaged in the field of human rights and protection, obstacles are posed by the slow pace at which men's traditional conception of women changes, and confusion of women are to be understood by equality of the sexes. Women's potentials have unfortunately been limited and has not fully been tapped because of socio-cultural prejudices and practices.

So, too, in the Western world, women were treated with disdain. They were regarded as second-class citizens. They were not allowed to hold responsible positions in the society. They were not even allowed to write books because they were seen by men as people who cannot produce something reasonable. But for those that picked up the courage to write, it became a war between life and death as Virginia Woolf states in her book *The Angel in the House*:

Had I not killed her, she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing . . . killing the angel in the house was part of the occupation of a woman writer (52).

From the above, we can understand the difficulties involved in being a female writer. To be a female writer one has to destroy the stereotype image of housewife and mother. In other words, women writers had before them the task of defying their marginality and subversion, not only in the house but in society as well. In Gaskell's letter of 25 August 1850, she talks about Charlotte Bronte's life. Gaskell writes that Bronte's girls were not taught anything by their father. Despite her unfortunate background, of her education and circumstance of her

life, Charlotte possesses a charming simplicity and power, and a strong feeling of responsibility in writing. Gaskell in his letter states:

Indeed, I never heard of so hard and dreary a life—extreme poverty is added to their trials. It (poverty) was no trial till her sisters had long-lingering illness. She is very silent and very shy, and when she speaks chiefly remarkable for the admirable use she makes of simple words and the way in which she makes language expresses her ideas (29).

Charlotte is not only an exemplary figure who could not only defy her conditions and express herself brilliantly; she is just one among the multitude of women who had something of importance to say in fiction. The tendency to relegate women to the background becomes naturally a part of the patriarchal ideology of the society which seeks among other things to place women just at the very brink of existence. Women are derogatorily cast as the daughters of Eve looking for the next man to feed an apple, a destructive apple that will end up hanging and choking out a man's throat. The image and role of women as the collaborators of serpent is a strong feature of the male authored text.

Chinua Achebe in most of his novels did not portray the image and role of women in most cases in positive light. His novels generously show women as appendages, women are quiet and subdued and their only concern is the children. But in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, a woman is the victim of her own fate. Obi and Clara have a future planned together but all of this is shattered when he learns that Clara is not of the freeborn class. As the novelist says:

What is the matter, Clara? Tell me, he was no longer unruffled. There was a hint of tears in his voice. I am an osu. She wept silently She stopped weeping and quietly disengaged herself from him. Still, he said nothing. So, you see we cannot get married. She said quietly, firmly, almost gaily—a terrible kind of gaiety (64).

Achebe creates a scene in which it is very easy to blame the woman for her tragic downfall. Clara is clearly the victim of circumstances because she cannot marry Obi and she has an abortion which nearly cost her life. After this tragic encounter with death, Clara drops out of the plot of the story and is never mentioned again.

Women are seen in our various societies as people whose daily lives begin and end on household chores. In order to assert the view that women are meant for only domestic work, men apply this slogan—women's education ends in the kitchen. There is no doubt that some women are very hardworking and that makes them discharge and accept the secondary roles imposed on them by men. Women are breaking the jinx, such that what a man can do, a woman can do it too and perfectly.

Thus, sexual assault and Female oppression is a problem that still exists in present day society. The fact that we live in a modern world with monumental technological advancement has not changed the grim reality that women are discriminated against and suppressed because of the patriarchal molded structures. The cultural beliefs, traditions and religions of most societies give more attention to patriarchy thereby ensuring the continuation of the domination and repression of women.

Many literary artists in our society therefore, try to expose the violence, humiliation and abuse of womanhood by the men and make efforts to redeem these deplorable conditions of women in their literary works. They also try to give answers to many questions raised on women's emancipation and the level of success recorded so far. The position of women in society has been a frequent focus of Nigerian female writers such as Buchi Emecheta, Chimamanda Ngozi- Adichie, Flora Nwapa, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, and Catherine Acholonu and a few modern ones like Cika Unigwe, Sefi Atta, Kaine Agary, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Ada Agbasimalo to mention but few who have engaged in literary polemics, using their arts to defend the positions of women in society. These writers present women as victims of gender discrimination, societal oppression and spousal abuse. Their works have shown them as advocates and defenders of the rights of women.

Emeka Nwabueze in his article "Woman Being in the African Society," traces the trajectory of female domination to the traditional African societies where heroic duties such as warring, hunting, and cultivating were reserved and performed by men while women were limited to cooking, hewing wood and fetching water. This was because men were considered to be more muscular and brawnier than women, who are still regarded as weak and feeble. There is growing evidence in many parts of Africa, of prejudices against women which are deeply rooted of these prejudices, the ones that perhaps most impinge on the dignity and rights of women, who constitute the focus of this study are sexual harassment, rape and exploitation. This worrisome development has continued to draw wide outcry, which of late has been fueled by the influence of rituals, moral decadence and promiscuity. Furthermore, in a traditional African society, women were not given educational opportunities with men. Then, formal education was predominantly a privilege given to the boys while the girls were suppressed to remain at home to help out in domestic chores. Time has shown that women can compete favourably within the men folk. Women as portrayed by female writers like Ifeoma Okoye play outstanding roles in agriculture, trade and as a typical example of hardworking ladies According to Sylvia Leith Ross: "Ije is a typical hardworking Igbo woman The Igbo woman is naturally industrious, ambitious and

independent They are bound to play leading roles in the development of their country and society” (41).

Furthermore, Rems Umeasiegbu in *The Way We Live: Igbo Culture and Stones*, asserts that "a woman's status in Igbo land is raised by Marriage and it is further enhanced by her ability to bear children"(12). This, however, brings to consideration the portrayal of women characters in marriage in matters relating to childbearing. It is obvious that when a man and a woman get married, the couple and their respective families are anxious to have a child as soon as possible. In a situation where there is a delay, the woman is usually held responsible as portrayed in many African novels. Efuru's inability to have a child in Flora Nwapa's *Efitru* is a case in point. Charles Nnolim comments that:

Ije is presumed barren and a deal of anxiety and money was expended on her cure. This made her face brutalisation, agony and ridicules from her crazy mother-in-law. She also had to face community ridicule when she was waiting for Dozie under the tree after the ceremony in their hometown. Some women began to discuss her (32).

The above shows the one-sided judgement of the society on issues of childlessness. Now, Dozie was not being tested of his fertility potential, and no blame is being apportioned to him but the woman has been easily presumed barren. Moreso, while women play minor roles in male authored novels, men are given major roles. The female writer shows her woman as the major character in the society as portrayed in their works of art. This is seen in their actions and aspirations. In view of this, Ruth Sheila says “the personality and inner reality of Nigerian women have been hidden under a heap of myths ... rapid generation and patent untruth. They might be interested in speaking for themselves when they decide to speak” (21). Chuma-Udeh Ngozi's *Echoes of a New Dawn* is all about an outdated, retrogressive and useless custom that is applicable to women alone during the death of their husbands. The *umuada* of the community sees it as a point of duty to see that the women carryout the "ikwaajadu" rite properly. They make the widow go through excruciating pains that even after the rites the women see it as a point of duty to keep to themselves.

We see women who are beaten, their hair shaved, they are made to stay in a tattered hut with ashes all over their bodies for two weeks, they are made to take their bath with dirty water used in cleaning their husband's body after two weeks, that is, if they are not forced to drink it, they are to sleep with the dead body of their husband and stay all through the night with it, that if it is not already smelling by them, they are even raped in the name of cleansing away spirits of the dead. All these are done to women when their husbands die, but no one thinks about the men being put through same shameful treatment when their wives die. Chuma-Udeh Ngozi used Lucia, a woman who is not from Africa, to expose the evil deeds of humans to fellow humans all in the name of customs and traditions. The novel

begins with Lucia in the "mourning hut of ashes" as they termed it. It was raining and Lucia got scared but she could not express herself for she is not to be heard. It is believed that a woman "sitting in ashes" do not have any opinion to express.

In this novel, Ngozi Chuma-Udeh exposed the evil deeds of this remote part of the society and absurd treatment given to women which many people have seen and are probably quiet about or have refused to admit because of fear. It is sheer inhumanity because you cannot even cry out to anyone. Sometimes some of the women die of these maltreatments and it is concluded that they killed their husbands and the spirit of the dead has come for them, whereas the women probably could not bear it any longer.

Furthermore, in the Nigerian contemporary society, there is the traditional tendency of restricting the women to their biological roles and images as housewives and mothers. This is carried into all spheres of societal life. It puts a story on the women. In male authored texts especially, the views of women being wives and mothers is upheld without compromise; the tendency to relegate women to the background is the only destiny for the Nigerian women, and this becomes naturally part of the popular ideology of the Nigerian society which seeks among other things to place women just at the very brink of existence. Women are usually given the derogatory image and roles of being daughters of eve, searching for the next man to lure to death. Therefore, discrimination against women in African traditional societies starts from the day the female infant steps into the world. In many cultures, sons enjoy greater importance than daughters because they are ones that can perpetuate their lineage while daughters are married off to perpetuate other family's procreation. The Egyptian, Nawal El Saadawi, the critic, Katherine Frank explains "has written *Woman at Point Zero* to show the ostracism and hatred women in Arab world provoke. "Zaye Sheikh's *Women in Arabic Literatures* copiously observes that:

El Saadawi in the novel *Woman at Point Zero* advances the theme of education, portraying the kind of education that the girl-child receives in the Arab world as waste. Saadawi is of the opinion that parents and the educational system pay lip service to human values, equity, work and freedom (3).

In Zaye's perception, the type of education Firdaws receives is traditional in status—a continuous warning about things forbidden and outlawed by religion and custom. Charles Nnolim in *African Feminism: The Scandalous Path* delineates thus:

Nawal El Saadawi paints a more disturbing picture of women who suffer under the triple operation of religion, patriarchy and class. According to her (Saadawi), marriage and the family are mechanisms through which women are subjugated and oppressed, for marriage breeds a master-slave relationship where a woman is

defined in terms of her husband. To eliminate men as agents of oppression, El Saadawi creates women as avengers, killers of the wicked men in their lives . . . Firdaws exclaims her hatred of all men, one of whom she eventually murders. All the men I did get to know, every single man of them has filled me with but one desire: to lift up my hand and bring it to smashing down on his face (52).

Isa Sanusi in her article, "Feminism, Islam and Hausa Literatures" argues that:

Some extreme feminist writers like Saadawi often loose the line by projecting the triumph of feminism through the pursuit of greatness in unbecoming ways that no civilised culture will welcome. Saadawi in her *Woman at Point Zero* directed Firdaws to go into prostitution. Firdaws attains not achievement but self-destruction and degradation of women folk at large. Zaynab Alkali, contrastingly instructing Li in *The Stillborn* to go back home and reorganise her family, which gave her self-fulfillment (*New Nigeria*, 15).

In response to Sanusi's assertion, Ila Musa in the same editorial indicates that the problem with Isa Sanusi is that she fails to understand that prostitution is a strategy employed to negate patriarchy and, in the process, a new woman is born:

The new woman or feminist . . . rebels against such traditionalism because she evinces a theory of personhood where the individual exists as an independent entity rather than a group member where she defined by her experiences rather than her kinship relations, where she has responsibility to realize her potentials for happiness rather than accept her role, where she has indefinable value rather than qualitative financial worth, and where she must reason about her own values (22).

In Saadawi's philosophy of gender relations, man owns the spiritual and material world, while woman on the other hand stand before the man deprived by the world of her freedom, name, self-respect, true nature and will. All control over her spiritual and material life has been taken from her, even her control over the little fruit which she creates inside her own blood and cells and atoms of her mind and heart (*Memoirs*, 79).

However much one may wish to circumvent the current issue of feminism with all its ingrained social value judgment, one cannot but recognize Buchi Emecheta's inclination towards that movement. Emecheta fits conveniently into the role of an ardent feminist since feminism in its broadest term means a pre-occupation and self-identification with issues concerning women. Buchi Emecheta proves in her vision that unlike the romanticised image of women by men folk, her heroine has never really been content, or self-fulfilled. Through real and imagined experiences, she explores the unlimited areas of women psyche looked over by the patriarchal class. The consequence is the portrayal of the black woman's helpless plight both in a traditional and changing society. Her protagonists are the deprived, the

discontented, the pathetic mothers who are paternal, matrimonial and social slaves. Emecheta bemoans the female loss of her rights. Fredrick Engels, the social thinker in *Selected Works in One Volume* laments that "the overthrow of mother right was the world historic defeat of the female sex. The man seized the reins of the house also, the woman was degraded, enthralled, the slave of the man's lust, a mere instrument for breeding children" (496).

Accordingly, Helen Chukwuma in *Feminism in African Literature* asserts that:

Marriage still remains the most submitting feature in African womanhood. It is not founded on partnership and further, the woman is tested on fertility as well as having children with the right gender aggregate. When she satisfies all these, as Nnu Ego does, the joy of motherhood proves ironical and elusive as Buchi Emecheta observes in *The Joys of Motherhood* (20).

The society Nnu Ego lives in recognises male supremacy in all its ramifications. The above statement is just a drop in the ocean compared to other discriminatory statements, impressions and, of course, practices the woman has to encounter. Gloria Chukwukere has explained that in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego's dilemma arises from the discord within matrimony. Through Nnu Ego, the writer states her most convincing case against female oppression and male intransigence. She rather posits that Emecheta opposes polygamy both as a source of female humiliation and as the reason for the economic deprivation which its victims, especially women suffer. Nnu Ego's pathetic cry reflects the predicament of womankind, "God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage?"

This paper is therefore, a critical exploration of the vulnerability of women in a patriarchal African society. The African society that discriminates against women and the girl-child and makes them perpetual tragic victims of its cultural traditions forms the fulcrum of this discourse. African women contribute significantly to the development of society both in the traditional and modern era. They are described as the foundation and the feeders of the nation. Such contributions, therefore, confer on African women prestigious roles in society. It is against this background that this study is undertaken to examine the tragic consequences of sexual harassment and exploitation as depicted in Sadaawi's *Woman at Point Zero*.

### **Women Subjugation and Traumatic Effect in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero***

The novel *Woman at Point Zero* dwells on the story of a rural woman Firdaws, whom El Saadawi met in the notorious Qanatir Prison while she was conducting research on the personalities of a group of women prisoners goaled for various offences. Firdaws herself was sentenced to death by hanging for killing a pimp Marzouk. Firdaws was born into a poor Egyptian family. By snatches of flashbacks, one understands that she has parents whose names are not disclosed in the narrative. As a result of the inhuman treatment, they conditioned her to marry at the early stages of her life. She doubts, therefore, if they are her parents as she says:

Back in my father's house I stared at the mud walls like a stranger who had never entered it before . . . but had suddenly dropped upon the skies ... to find myself in a place where I did not belong . . . born from a father who was not my father and from a mother who was not my mother (16).

At the death of her parents, her uncle takes her to Cairo where he lives (19). After her secondary education, her uncle sells her off to the sixty-year-old man Sheikh Mahmoud. It is at this point that complication sets in, in the entire plot. The social, cultural, religious, political and sexual pressure, and oppression that confront^ women are also prevalent in the Arab world— Egypt—which is the geographical setting of *Woman at Point Zero*. The condition of women in the Egyptian society stems from history. Many writers, traditional and religious leaders, separate the struggles of women in Africa for self-emancipation from the struggles of women everywhere against the structure of the society. Yet, it is such strong feminist novel like El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* that can stop exploitation that puts women at point zero, both in the society and in the family unit despite all the changes which the society has witnessed and continues to witness.

The problem which Firdaws the protagonist suffers are partly naturalistic. This centres on the fact that the totality of her existence owes a good deal to her environment or that her situation in life is primarily determined by forces of the environment and heredity. Hence, the perception of the deprived in the novel is a bleak and hopeless one where hopes of correction of the drift of humanity towards self-induced destruction exists only in whispers, since human beings, from experience, cannot pull themselves apart from their environment. In this vein, Firdaw's dilemma arises from the traditional, religious, social and gender-political precepts of an Islamic society. Her own case would have been less painful if she was born into a wealthy family. She notes:

By birth I was a lower class. My father a poor peasant farmer . . . knew very few things in life . . . how to exchange his virgin daughter for a dowry . . . , how to beat his wife and make her bite the dust each night" (12).

The issue of female subjugation in Islamic societies starts from birth. Right from the moment she (Firdaws) was given birth to, the expression on her parents' face indicates that she is not welcomed, born with something missing. According to Evelyn Accad, in *Veil of Shame: The Role of Women in Contemporary Fiction*, "the family system is programmed only to accept the birth of male children . . . and a baby girl is a severe impediment" (2). The essence of the above statement is adequately realised in Firdaws father's misogynist attitude. When one of his female children died, my father would eat his supper, my mother would wash his legs, and then he would go to sleep, just as he did every night. When the child that died was a boy, he would beat my mother (18). Being a girl, therefore, her own case is not different. Her primary duty in the family is to knead the dough and do other sexist chores which the society limits her and her folk to. She ponders over this state, ". . . was I going to spend my life sweeping the dung out from under the animals, carrying manure on my head, kneading dough, and baking bread?" (18).

Social class and religion are interconnected. Religious status is also one of the determinants of one's class in Egypt. Both contribute greatly in shaping the ideals and values of people in any society. They also constitute strong agents of female subordination as shown by Nawal El Saadawi in the novel. She presents the Egyptian society as a case study, questioning the traditional and religious systems which do not offer women the opportunity to develop themselves properly as efficient human beings without being preys to the dictates of men who came in contact with them at one time or the other. Saadawi equally makes a clarion call to develop women's rights to all freedom and independence in determining crucial issues on their side, especially those concerning their existence. She shows that women will have no good hope except if justifiably put into practice the principles of social justice and equality.

The novel indicates that women in Egypt are governed by the nasty laws of obedience consecrated in the Egyptian marriage code. Little wonder Firdaws does not revolt against her unacceptable, aggressive sixty-year-old husband Sheikh Mahmoud. In this marital relationship, Firdaws remains a source of free service that would have been lovely compensated if her marriage was made on justifiable institutional arrangements and on the human rights principles of choice, thought and expression. Thus, she grows to suppress her own desires, empty herself of original self and wishes linked to herself and to fill the vacuum that results with the desires of others.

Firdaws having lost her personality, capacity and right to think independently at variant with what the Islamic religion and culture holds, eventually becomes a victim of male deceit as highlighted in a generalised manner through an authorial comment:

All women are victims of deception. Men impose deception on women and punish them for being deceived, force them down to the lowest level and punish them for falling so low, bind them in marriage and chastise them with menial service for life or insults or blows (86).

Any attempt to undertake an in-depth study of Firdaws' status, if freed from the attitude which considers her only as a whore, will inevitably lead to an examination of a much broader range of issues related to all aspects of human life. It carries us into the never-ending struggle for peace, love, dignity and freedom, the price women pay in slavery even if accompanied by some security and peace of mind that come from acceptance is much higher than the price paid for freedom even when it includes the aggression of the society. For a woman like Firdaws to regain her personality,' her intrinsic and real self is much worthwhile than all the acclamations of a male dominated society. The private lives of men around her and their sexual instinct are the directing and motivating force which, if translated into the final analysis, is the result of Firdaws' vengeance and assertion—"Did life teach you to kill? Of course, it did" (99). Her extreme realities include her utilisation by men as a sex object.

The content of *Woman at Point Zero* depends on a struggle which ends in a heroic tragedy. The writer succeeds in exposing and at once condemning the partial existing order which is the source of class and patriarchal system that has ruled over human beings ever since the slavery of women started to hold sway. Firdaws fate is a dilemma that deserves to be told, described for the world to see and be registered, be it tragic, comic or satirical. Many are the strange and lamentable situations in her life that inspire tears and laughter at the same time. Literally, her life end in tragedy, a true reflection of the cruelty, loneliness, difficulty and gender discrimination which confront a vibrant but helpless girl living in a society whose man is God and decides how best to satisfy his interests and whims; and where girls are considered as receptacles for the development of the embryo or bodies designed for male pleasures. Ehla in Nurudd in Farrah's *From a Crooked Rib* delineates this: "A man needs a woman. A woman needs a man. Not to the same degree? A man needs a woman to cheat, tell lies and to sleep with" (12).

Maybe it, Firdaws is exposed to a severe emotional crisis as a result of her sincere touching love relationship with Ibrahim; her co-employee in the company where she secures a job. Regrettably, Ibrahim humiliated her. In the course of ranging events, she soberly and disappointedly recollects, "He (Ibrahim) got engaged to chairman's daughter yesterday . . .

I wept but tears have dried once and for all" (84). Without double mind, Firdaws resigned from her job immediately her relationship with Ibrahim is broken and sort solace in prostitution instead. Also stressed by Saadawi in the novel is the injustice meted on women at work places. Through Firdaws experience in the big industry, Nawal El Saadawi explores constructively other ways of female exploitation worse than prostitution. Due to lack of opportunity for higher education, women, using Firdaws as a point of contact, are relegated to the lower sectors of employment strata. They are subjected to sexual harassment and used by men through blackmail guaranteed to make women submit their bodies hopelessly to them. According to Firdaws, the female employee is more sexually exploited than the prostitutes. The female employee will always want to please her boss, the executives and the chairman of the company for material benefits. She cannot say no because her no leads to the termination of her appointment and in the process, she contracts diseases. In her words:

I felt sorry for the other girls who were guileless enough to offer their bodies and other physical efforts every night . . . just to ensure that they would not be treated unfairly or discriminated against or transgressed and so she pays the price for things of the lowest value ... I also know that if I lost my job, all I would lose with it was the miserable slavery (75).

The emancipation of women in Egypt cannot be achieved unless the root causes of the conditions leading to oppression are swept away. Real emancipation in this context can only mean freedom from all forms of exploitation, whether psychological, physical, traditional, religious, economic, sexual, social etc. For such a character like Firdaws, economic emancipation may not be sufficient as long as the patriarchal class remains dominant and carries with it a train of consequences in relationships between men and women.

Moreover, the human rights agenda is against all forms of slavery and commercialisation of women in the manner of bride price. Firdaws asserts "that marriage was the system built on the cruelest suffering for women" (86). True, human dignity is fundamentally against transforming human being into an instrument for sale. The marriage customs followed in the Arab world negates true human value, turning the woman into merchandise.

In the guise of a good marriage, Firdaws is sold off to the old pensioner, Sheikh Mahmoud, by her uncle in alliance with his fat, short wife because the old man can afford to pay a big dowry. The following conversation between Firdaws' uncle and his wife points to this: "My uncle, Sheikh Mahmoud, is a virtuous man. He has a big pension and no children ... If he marries Firdaws, she will have a good life with him . . . I intend to ask him a dowry. How much? A hundred pounds, or perhaps even two hundred . . ." (36). Taking cognisance of

the tradition, one finds out that the consent of her father or another male member of her family—the uncle or brother—in matters concerning her marriage is important. Thus, she could not flout the choice made for her because of parental authority, in this aspect her marriage. Unfortunately, this marriage marks the crucial beginning of the turning point in her life. Her poor parentage which accords her no inheritance rights also denies her fundamental rights to correspondence. Sheikh Mahmoud stands to gain more respect and social standing by marrying into the family of a respected and religious man—a sheikh.

In view of this new development in the work, Firdaws is denied the family peaceful atmosphere she used to know in her uncle's place. her description of the man's physical built and their manner of living registers her total disgust over the whole situation:

On his chin, below the lip, was a large swelling with a hole in the middle. Some days the hole would be dry but in others it would turn into a rusty old tap exuding drops red in colour like blood or whitish yellow-like pus. One day he discovered some left-over scrapes of food, and started yelling at me . . . beating me (48).

From the above, it is observed that physical violence against women is manifested in various forms, such as wife battering and sexual abuse. Physical violence shows the use of force against another, leading to bodily harm. Wife battering is meticulously condoned by the precepts of Islamic religion. Her uncle says: "All husbands beat their wives . . ." (44). And his wife adds that her husband beats her, ". . . that it is precisely men well versed in their religion who beat their wives. The precepts of religion permitted such punishment" (44). The woman is not supposed to complain about her husband's inhumanity to her. Their duty is perfect obedience. Later, Firdaws is raped and almost beaten to death by Sheikh Mahmoud in a bid to subdue her. It is after this incident that she made the choice of fleeing for her life.

Even in relationship other than marriage, men still exert control over the women through violence. Fawzy feels compelled to beat his girlfriend Shariya when she threatens to report him to the police. He counters: "It is a long time since I last hit you. It looks as though you are yearning for a good hitting" (59). This relationship gives Fawzy the leverage to exercise control over Shariya, which manifests through physical violence.

In Nawal El Saadawi's perception, one of the first principles of honour and love is that no one should intimidate another. If a man owns a woman as though she is his property, the relationship cannot in any sense be described as honourable. Honour is justice and equality in human rights. One of the conditions of honesty is an exchange and a necessary condition for exchange is a balance between the partners. Therefore, exchange cannot take place between a master and slave, between someone higher and someone lower, like Firdaws, the heroine of the novel. Bayoumi who picked Firdaws in the street when she elopes from her

husband's house acts more like a dog. He never that the existence of Firdaws in his huse is not a means to an irrational end. Their relationship degenerates into physical violence and abuse (47). He calls her a "slut," "a bitch."

The issue of prostitution is another case in point in her work which the author examines in a very satirical tone through Firdaws comment: "My work is not worthy of respect, why then do you join in it with me?" (71). Generally, prostitution is sexual intercourse between a woman and a man, aimed at satisfying the man's sexual and the woman's economic needs. She (Firdaws) went further to say: "When I was a prostitute, I never gave anything for nothing but always took something in return" (85). Unfortunately, society considers the woman's economic needs less important. An instance is perhaps the drama that happens between Firdaws and the policeman. After a good dose of sexual satisfaction, he kicks her out emptily, "What are you waiting for? I have no money on me tonight. I'll give you the money next time" (62). In examining the factors that unquestionably leads Firdaws into prostitution, we came to realise that her uncle, father and husband are major factors. She indicates, "I am not a prostitute. But fight from early days of my father, my uncle, husband, all of them taught me to grow up as a prostitute" (99). Pitted against these figures in authority, the woman is pushed into a corner from where there is no escape.

Another factor that leads her into prostitution is the patriarchal society which has made no good provision for her in life: ". . . That my country had given me nothing, but had also taken away anything I might have had, including my honour and dignity" (90). This is an infringement on her rights to equal access to public services and freedom from degrading treatment. However, as a prostitute she is only safe when she is under the influence of a pimp like Marzouk or the police. Marzouk informs Firdaws that "every prostitute has a pimp to protect her from other pimps and from the police . . . there isn't a woman on earth who can protect herself (99). In highlighting these, Nawal El Saadawi affirms that:

Today, prostitution in Arab countries is illegal, although it is carried on clandestinely, or sometimes openly. A prostitute is safe if she is under the protection of the police or somebody with influence (61).

The writer stresses in the novel that the division of society into masters and slaves places women in a position whereby they can never be masters on their own. She presents this through Marzouk who forces his way into Firdaws' life in his bid to become her pimp. Firdaws belongs to him body and soul, to do with as he pleases and any attempt to resist is met with physical violence. *A Woman at Point Zero* does not celebrate prostitution. As an enlightened Egyptian woman, Saadawi knows how best to build up the ideas, theory and modes of struggle needed to rescue her fellow women from every oppression. Therefore,

she questions the existing partial laws of the land and draws society's attention to the inevitable cause of women trafficking.

The novel x-rays the issue of female circumcision. The Egyptians lay great emphasis on a woman's virginity. In this kind of setting if a girl loses her life, it would be considered less of a catastrophe than when she loses her virginity. This is because her virginity ensures the honour of her family and attracts more bride price. In order to keep her hymen intact until she goes into the marriage bed, she is therefore circumcised. Firdaws is a slave to this retrograde and cruel practice. When sexual awareness begins to surface in her, she is beaten and circumcised to repress any sexual urge that could lead to a wayward life. As she says: "One day I asked my mother about him. How was it that she had given birth to me without a father? First, she beat me. Then she brought a woman who was carrying a small knife or razor blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from between my thighs" (13).

Circumcision denies a woman sexual gratification and its supposed purity does not guarantee the female child any safety from sexual molestation by men, some of whom society regards as religious and pious. Psychological violence is conceived as even more dangerous and destructive than physical violence. This is because this kind of violence attacks the mind and emotions. The role of social class in the repression of women constitutes psychological violence against them, through the various stages of Firdaws' life, she is exposed to psychological violence. She is subjected to the pains and trauma of female circumcision; she faced the double standard in her society which regards her body as a property whose honour, if absent, attracts the very men who dishonour her to go unpunished. She is made to feel inferior to her brother and at a tender age, she is sexually abused by her uncle (22).

More so, Firdaws' relationship with her husband, Bayoumi and his friend constitutes psychological violence. Firstly, with her uncle she is made conscious of her sexuality, with her husband she receives no sexual gratification, with Bayoumi she becomes a passive prostitute. Also, her relationship with Sharifa is an example of how women cause psychological violence to their folk. Sharifa's denial of Firdaws' right to fully benefit from her labour constitutes violence too. Marzouk's forceful entry into her life reinforces psychological violence against women. Psychological violence poses a great danger to all women who are in the Muslim society. Often, they are unable to recover from this kind of violence as evident in the case of the protagonist Firdaws.

Nevertheless, Firdaws' circumstances in life, sexual exploitation, psychological and physical violence and a host of other flagrant abuses on her fundamental rights make her develop the spirit of vengeance, retaliation and despair. In her revolutionary zeal, she kills the notorious pimp, Marzouk (95). In her attempt to slaughter another son of a dog, the

Prince, he alerts the policemen who came, arrested and imprisoned her. Through her revelation, they arrested her not because she killed a pimp but because of her truth and honesty (100). The system proves stronger and Firdaws is hanged in order to preserve the patriarchal class system. In view of all these, it is certain that self actualisation of women in the Arab world as explained in the novel *Woman at Point Zero* can only materialise with a total destruction of barriers of religion and social class, all of which stand in opposition to the United Nations Charter on human rights.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, El Saadawi in *Women at Point Zero* presents the Islamic religion and social class as agents of female subjugation in the Egyptian society. She further reveals a distinctive division between men and women, no matter their strata into masters (men) and slaves (women) respectively. Using her female character, Firdaws, as a point of focus, Nawal El Saadawi issues a strong condemnation of the above situation by exposing vibrantly the socio-cultural ordeals suffered by African women that violate their life and retard the progress of the African people.

Above all, it is evident that Saadawi realises that the total liberation of women is dependent on the destruction of the ideology of male supremacy. Nawal El Saadawi is of the opinion that issues such as the class structure of societies which are reinforced by institutions such as religion, are also largely responsible for women oppression, especially in Muslim dominated Arab societies of Africa. For Saadawi, only through universalisation of social authority leading to a transcendence of women will this form of oppression be eradicated.

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