

Silent Struggles: The Subjugation of Women in Arab Society Explored Through *Woman at Point Zero*

Nadeem Khan

Lecturer English, Directorate of Education, Govt. of NCT Delhi, New Delhi, India

Abstract

In her works Nawal El Sadawi has depicted the patriarchal society of the Arab world. The women are not given the same opportunities as men rather they are subjugated and tortured both mentally and physically by the men. This article explores the marginalization of the women in *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El Sadawi highlighting the tools through which the women are suppressed in society for example; bride price, Female Genital Mutilation, deprivation of education etc. Through the life story of Firdaus, the sufferings of the women in an Arab world are underlined. Power politics plays a major role behind the quest of man to acquire 'money, sex and power' over women.

Keywords: Gender, Power Politics, Female Genital Mutilation, Patriarchy in Arab World

Introduction

Nawal El Sadawi (1931–2021) was an Egyptian author, feminist, and psychiatrist renowned for her fearless exploration of societal issues, particularly the oppression of women in the Arab world. Born in a conservative environment, El Sadawi defied traditional norms to become a pioneering voice advocating for gender equality and social justice. Her works, which include novels, essays, and plays, vividly depict the complexities of patriarchal systems, addressing topics such as female genital mutilation, women's rights, and the intersection of power and gender dynamics. A powerful force in the literary and feminist movements, Nawal El Sadawi left an indelible mark on the landscape of Arab literature and the global discourse on gender and human rights.

Female Genital Mutilation

Removal of any part of the female genitalia is considered as female genital mutilation. It is carried out mostly in African and South Asian countries. Intact hymen and suppression of the female sexual desire for intercourse are the chief reasons behind this practice. This is not backed by any religion still it is being carried out widely. It is done by the midwives when the girl is around seven or eight mainly before the puberty age. It has been considered a human right violation, though banned in many countries, it is still prevalent in most of the societies of Egypt, Sudan, Somalia etc.

There are four types of female genital mutilation following below;-

1. Clitoridectomy - Removal of the part or whole clitoris.

2. **Excision** - Removal of the part or whole of the clitoris and the inner labia with or without the removal of the outer labia.
3. **Infibulation** - Removal of the clitoris, inner and outer labia and stitching the two sides together with a flap of sheep skin leaving a small opening for urine and menstrual blood to pass.
4. Any other sort of damage to female genitalia for example injury, burn, cut, stitching, pricking etc.

Effects of female circumcision are infertility, infection, numbness, being devoid of pleasure etc. The girls who do not undergo the circumcision are considered 'impure' and they are never able to marry. However, in reality the FGM is completely a tool of patriarchy to exercise the control over woman's sexuality to keep the hymen intact hence, the so-called honour of the family. The immediate effects are shock by severe pain and bleeding, biting of tongue, bedridden for weeks, difficulty in passing urine. Long term effects are mental trauma, no sexual pleasure etc.

In *The Hidden Face of Eve*, El Sadawi highlights the plight of the victims of FGM who share their immensely painful account to what they experienced after the operation. One woman said "The pain in my external genital organs led to retention of urine. I wanted to urinate, the burning sensation was so unbearable that I could not bring myself to pass water" (Pg. 70).

The FGM is also backed by power politics since it provides a control over the woman, her sexuality, and her desires. It works as a device to save the virginity of the woman for her husband until the marriage, thus keeping the 'honor' of the family. Moreover, it is widely supported by the practitioners of it for it provides them the means to live.

The *dayas*, midwives and barbers perform the operation in the surveillance of the family members especially women. The operation is done by holding the girl in a sitting or lying position. Some women act as helpers by holding the girls' legs wide apart. They keep a cloth spread on the floor, ash and some herbs to smear on the wound.

Woman at Point Zero

An Overview

El Sadawi's novel *Woman at Zero Point* is a story of a woman named Firdaus which means heaven in Arabic but ironically her entire life is just the opposite. The novel opens with Firdaus in prison, accused to murder a man. She eventually agrees to tell her story to the psychiatrist. She is a prostitute, who was orphaned in childhood and lived with her uncle and aunt who sent her to a boarding school at a young age and she passed the school with good grades and returned to her uncle's house at 16. Uncle and aunt married her off to the elderly man named Sheikh Mahmoud, who used to beat her and once she escaped and returned to her uncle's house but they sent her back. In another, occasion when her husband beat her she escaped but she had nowhere to go and went to a coffee house, where the owner raped her and trapped her in his apartment. She escaped from there and met Sharifa who brought her into prostitution. Later she was again sexually abused by a policeman and she decided to live a respectful life by working in an office as a clerk but again she was exploited and she returned to the streets where she killed a pimp in the subsequent course of the action. She thus ended up in the prison waiting for her execution.

Subjugation of Women: Textual Analysis

The woman is seen as a commodity in most societies, her choice and individuality have been long neglected. Even her desires are suppressed since childhood. Her sexuality is controlled and virginity is protected since they are considered the markers of the family's dignity. Same happens with women in Arab countries like Egypt. Firstly, the religion puts women under a variety of restrictions which make them 'the second sex' to men. In *Woman at Point Zero*, the depiction of women is pitiable for they are confronted with challenges since childhood.

The protagonist of the novel, Firdaus' life is miserable since birth. Her father was a wife beater and a careless one. He never skipped his supper even when his girl child died. If it had been a baby boy he would first beat the mother and then eat his supper. There are instances when the children didn't have anything to eat but being the male of the family he was always served with food. He once blew the hand of Firdaus for asking for some food. Firdaus mentions "My mother would hide his food from us at the bottom of one of the holes in the oven. He would sit eating alone while we watched him" (pg.18). This shows how society favors the man and neglects the women even if they are children.

She was married to an elderly Sheikh Mahmoud who often beat her and kept her for his physical needs and food. She did not like him but having no choice she surrendered herself to him. Once he grew a boil on his face but he would sexually use her not considering her disgust to the pus coming out of the boil. She left her husband's house after he beat her with his shoe leaving her body and face swollen, but instead of getting support, her aunt told her that all husbands beat their wives and it is the duty of a good wife to bear everything patiently adding that "a virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience" (Pg. 46).

Throughout the novel, Firdaus is a prey to men who only want to take sexual advantages from her. Even her uncle exploited her when they slept together he advanced his hand over her thighs, she mentions that "his trembling fingers would feel their way slowly upwards over my thighs" (Pg. 21). Bayoumi first plays a caring man before trapping Firdaus in his house. He rapes her continuously for many days. The incident where he asks her preference between oranges and tangerines is crucial in the novel. This is the first time in her life when her choice is asked, she first feels strange but later chooses tangerines only because they were cheaper, later realizing that she likes oranges but keeps quiet. In a patriarchal society the women have no voice and no decision making power. In her entire life Firdaus was given no choice whether it was her education, marriage or love interest. She had been following everything as she was instructed. This incident is crucial for it makes her think for herself for the first time.

Another incident shows her with the policeman who first catches her by arm and morally preaches her but later he sexually abuses her and refuses to pay one pound which he promised earlier. The question arises who is actually immortal here?

She grew fond of reading about the life of rulers and she discovered all the rulers were men who were in a continuous quest for money, sex and power. Moreover, they had the same desires to attain money, sex and power. Nothing much has changed over the years, the ordinary man is on the same quest. As we see in the novel, each man in Firdaus' life wants sexual benefits from her by exercising their power. These

three traits are desirable to all men who want to possess power, especially on the females; husbands beating their wives is the prime example. They want to quench their sexual hunger even if they have to rape a woman as Bayoumi does. Further they want to extort money too, the first example is the practice of dowry. Dowry has converted the institution of marriage into a business. The husbands want to marry the woman who brings the most dowry, this incapacitate the poor women who can not offer good dowry. The patriarchal structure of the society favors men in all the possibilities and renders women dependent and marginalized.

She was circumcised in childhood when her friendship with Mohamadain was discovered. In her later life as a prostitute, it was revealed that she does not feel pleasure in sex, she mentions several times about this in the text.

El Sadawi makes it clear that she used to feel the pleasure while playing ‘bride and bridegroom’ with her childhood friend Mohamadain. She would spend the whole day in the fields where he laid her on the straws and lifted her clothes to touch her sensitive part to give her the pleasure sensation. Later, she would touch the exact spot with her own hand only to remind her of the same pleasure she had felt with Mohamadain. This incident clearly shows that she experienced the pleasure in her early life, this is something she did not feel later. As a prostitute she had to be sexually involved with many men but she had no pleasure in the act.

On asking her mother how she got pregnant with her without a father. Instead of replying to her question she got her circumcised. “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”(p.12). What we understand out of this is that a female is not expected to have any desires or emotions related to sex.

During her days in school, she developed a love for books. She read about the rulers realizing “that all these rulers were men. What they had in common was an avaricious and distorted personality, a never-ending appetite for money, sex and unlimited power”(pg. 26-27). The men she meets in her life, though not any rulers but they all wanted the above-mentioned. Here the power mostly enjoyed by the male characters is the power over women. Whether it is her uncle, her father, the men she meets in her life like the coffee house owner, policeman, the pimp, her clients etc. They all want to subjugate the women by one means or the other.

Conclusion

For the predicaments she has to go through an aversion for men grows in Firdaus. Another reason for her abhorrence to men is her not being able to get pleasure during sex, therefore she started to hate males for not touching her soul and the body rather they scratched them both. As highlighted in the essay, her desires are crushed because she was born as a girl and this atrocity was further exaggerated by the female genital mutilation. The woman in an Arab world is only a pawn in the hands of men. Throughout her life she has been exploited, tortured, and beaten by men for no reason. The execution of Firdaus symbolizes that death is the only escape for women. It is death which brings a complete end to her sufferings. This is true since the place of a woman is at ‘point zero’ as the title suggests. She is only at the margins, nowhere to belong, nowhere to live happily.

Bibliography

1. El Sadawi, Nawal. *The Hidden Face of Eve*. Zed Books. 1980. Print
2. El Sadawi, Nawal. *Woman at Point Zero*. Zed Books. 1983. Print.
3. Kouba, Leonard J. and Judith Muasher. "Female Circumcision in Africa: An Overview" *African Studies Review* 28.1, pp. 95-110, 1985.
4. Saungweme, Furaha Joy Sekai. "Critique of Africa's Post-Colonial Freedoms Through a Feminist Lens: Challenging Patriarchy and Assessing the Gains". *African Feminisms Across Generations*. Heinrich Böll Stiftung. 2021. Web