

The Body as a Battlefield: Politics of Identity in Nawal El Saadawi's Woman at Point Zero

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Abstract

The female body is shown in Nawal El Saadawi's "Woman at Point Zero" as a contested place where cultural expectations, personal aspirations, and society conventions collide. The story highlights the intersections of gender, class, and power by exposing the harsh reality of patriarchal control over women's bodies and identities through Firdaus's journey. This research paper explores how Firdaus navigates oppression, resistance, and ultimately empowerment while using her body as a battlefield. Saadawi's work highlights the critical need for female autonomy and self-definition in the face of structural patriarchy, igniting important discussions on women's freedom and rights. The female body is portrayed as the principal site of contestation in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, serving as a battlefield where patriarchal, social, and economic forces fight to keep Firdaus under control. The brutal process of commodifying the female body is exemplified by Firdaus's path from a rural child to a convicted killer on death row, which ultimately leads her to regain her identity through a final, radical act of rebellion. This narrative not only serves as a powerful critique of societal norms but also inspires readers to reflect on their own roles within these structures. By shedding light on Firdaus's struggles and triumphs, the work encourages a broader dialogue about the importance of dismantling oppressive systems and fostering an environment where women can reclaim their identities and agency.

Key Words: Patriarchy, Female empowerment, Body politics, Identity, Resistance, Oppression, Autonomy.

Introduction

"Power dynamics are played out in the body, which is a site of politics. Firdaus's body turns into a battlefield in Nawal El Saadawi's "Woman at Point Zero," where cultural expectations, society conventions, and individual aspirations compete. This paper examines how Saadawi's novel challenges patriarchal authority by emphasizing the connections between gender, class, and power and, in the end, reaffirming the necessity of female autonomy and self-determination. Saadawi ignites important discussions on resistance, empowerment, and freedom by exposing the harsh realities of a culture that commodifies women's bodies and silences their voices through Firdaus's journey. The current study focuses on resistance and empowerment: Firdaus's path to autonomy and self-definition, and oppression and control: how Saadawi depicts societal forces dominating Firdaus's body. Saadawi demonstrates in "Woman at Point Zero" how Firdaus's body is controlled by societal pressures like classism, patriarchy, and cultural conventions. Firdaus's body is objectified and commodified by those in positions of authority, starting with her childhood trauma and continuing through her experiences with marriage and prostitution. Saadawi criticizes how these factors convert women's bodies into places of oppression by silencing their voices and stifling their autonomy. Through vivid imagery and poignant narrative, Saadawi illustrates the brutal realities faced by women who are trapped in a cycle of exploitation. This relentless struggle for agency highlights the urgent need for societal transformation and the reclamation of women's rights and identities.

The Body as a Site of Patriarchal Violence and Control

Physical Violation:

The body of Firdaus in "Woman at Point Zero" is a painting the cruelty and power of patriarchy. From a young age, Firdaus's body is subjected to traumatic acts, including female genital mutilation (excision) and incestuous molestation, which serves to rob her of her autonomy, sexuality, and pleasure. Saadawi provides examples of how patriarchal domination is reinforced by societal causes that cause women emotional and bodily suffering. By physical violence Firdaus endures severe physical abuse, including as beatings from her uncle and harshness from her husband, demonstrating how men control women's bodies. Under Emotional trauma Firdaus's encounters with exploitation, abandonment, and loss leave him with severe emotional wounds, underscoring the ways in which patriarchal structures support.

The objectification and sale of her body serve as an example of how women's bodies are treated like property, depriving them of their autonomy that is the example of psychological violence. Physical abuse is a harsh reality for Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero*. She has experienced childhood trauma and genital mutilation, which leaves her scarred and vulnerable. Once more, she is deprived of bodily autonomy due to forced marriage, her husband's cruel treatment, and marital rape. Additionally, she is abused and exploited by prostitution clients, who turn her body into a commodity. Through this novel the Egyptian novelist Nawal El Saadawi depicted the inhumane exploitation of women under the age of patriarchy in the third world.

Surveillance and Subjugation:

Surveillance and subjugation are instruments of patriarchal control in *Woman at Point Zero*. Firdaus is continuously watched by the societal gaze, where family, community, and society all keep an eye on, evaluate, and regulate her behavior. In addition, patriarchal values are reinforced by male-dominated Egyptian culture, which dictates what woman can and cannot do. Internalized oppression: Firdaus struggles with autonomy and self-worth as a result of internalizing these rules.

Forced Subservience:

The resistance of Firdaus burns slowly. She finds ways to demonstrate her limited individuality while navigating the complexities of her reality. By rejecting social norms Firdaus begins to doubt the expectations placed on her, such as marriage and servitude. However, because she is financially independent, she chooses to become a prostitute in order to take charge of her body and decisions. In the end, she decides to use violence to restore her agency by killing her pimp. For Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero*, compulsory subservience is a harsh reality. She has been trained to submit and obey. Firdaus is trained as a youngster to control her desires and put the needs of others before her own. Her husband expects her to be a subservient wife within the institute of marriage and domestication, dictating every action she takes. She has little options because of the social pressure and expectations of the Egyptian community, which encourage her subservience. Domestic abuse and forced marriage to a guy who is decades older mute the body and render it "dead," where it is viewed as a lifeless object of servitude and desire, a "dead body" incapable of feeling.

Prostitution as a Weapon for Economic Independence and Political Action

Reclaiming the Body:

After awareness of oppression like "I was a small, insignificant part of a vast machine" (p. 3) meanwhile her understanding that she was a cog in a bigger social structure so Firdaus turns to prostitution after realizing the pointlessness of being a "virtuous" woman (who is nonetheless abused). Also she rejecting roles that are imposed by society upon her, 'Firdaus refused to marry Sheikh Mohammed (p.38) demonstrates her defiance of social norms. By controlling the terms of her engagements and selecting her clients, she regains control over her body and uses it as a source of financial power. Nawal El Saadawi's "Reclaiming the Body" is a potent topic in *Woman at Point Zero*. Firdaus, the main character, must negotiate a patriarchal society that exploits and controls women's bodies. Meanwhile Saadawi claiming independence through protagonist's choice to murder her pimp (p. 96), which signifies a significant milestone in her quest for personal empowerment. Firdaus' proclamation of independence and self-governance Saadawi challenges cultural conventions that objectify women's bodies, dictate their autonomy and choices, and sustain injustice and violence through Firdaus' trip. "My body is mine" (p. 112) through this quotation she declares her autonomy and self-ownership. In order to achieve empowerment, Firdaus must challenge these conventions and reclaim her body and agency.

The Prostitute as a Free Woman:

The Prostitute as a Free Woman: Firdaus argues that a successful prostitute, by refusing to be owned by any single man, experiences greater liberation than a wife. She protects her deeper, more authentic self while using her body as an "outer shell" or a commodity that she exchanges for survival. This perspective challenges traditional notions of freedom and ownership, suggesting that societal expectations often confine women more severely than the choices they make for themselves. As Firdaus navigates her complex reality, she embodies the struggle for autonomy in a world that seeks to define her worth through relationships with men. By choosing prostitution as a way to regain control over her body and life, she is challenging social standards. She is separating herself from social expectations and emotional attachment by making her body a commodity. The highlighted views of Saadawi appear in the novel: Criticism of patriarchal structures: Firdaus selects the conditions of her engagement, but both marriage and prostitution include transactional relationships. Inner freedom: By keeping her inner and outer selves apart, Firdaus preserves her independence. In a culture where women have few options, prostitution becomes a survival tactic. This choice, while controversial, allows her to navigate a world that often seeks to control and define her. By asserting her autonomy in such a stark manner, she ultimately challenges the very foundations of a society that restricts women's roles and reinforces their subservience.

Challenging Social Hierarchy:

As an affluent sex worker, she skillfully uses her body to challenge Egypt's economic and patriarchal systems, defying the hypocrisy of the elite who covertly use the services they openly denounce. A successful prostitute is one who does not fall in love with her clients" (p. 112) it highlights Firdaus' detachment and control in her profession. Because Firdaus is a wealthy prostitute, the hypocrisy of society is reversed. She is conscious of the double standards and takes advantage of them by satisfying the needs of the elite, revealing the inconsistencies in Social norms. This emphasizes: privileged hypocrisy is criticized through Firdaus exposes the covert use of services that they openly condemn. The men who came to see me were revered and admired as social pillars (p. 86) demonstrates the difference between one's private behavior and public image. Firdaus opposes the systems that aim to subjugate her by using her

position and betrayal of patriarchal power. The reference from the text, 'Firdaus charges high prices and dictates terms to her clients....' (p. 90-92) in these exchanges, she exhibits her agency and control over subversion of patriarchal power. Firdaus' body becomes a site of resistance against oppressive structures. It seems the confluence of capitalism and patriarchy of third world society. Firdaus's strategy for handling her circumstances and preserving her inner autonomy through the skill of prostitution so to her body becomes commodity, "My body was like an outer shell... something separate from me" (p. 112).

Identity Politics: Transitioning from Object to Subject

The "Point Zero" of Existence:

When Marzouk tries to take her by force and steal the majority of her money, Firdaus is ultimately motivated to kill him. Her last act of resistance to subjugation is this one. A crucial time is "Point Zero". Firdaus's final declaration of independence and rejection of oppression is her murder of Marzouk. She is able to escape the bonds that bound her by taking charge of her circumstances. These instance observations are her final refusal of submission like Firdaus makes her own decisions, even if they result in her demise. Her weapon of empowerment by violence appears an intricate, unvarnished method of rebellion against her oppressor. Finally her existential decision makes her strong in place of suppression. Firdaus accepts responsibility for her deeds and destiny that's her powerful move to continue her journey of life.

Death as Ultimate Liberation:

She declines a pardon while on death row because she understands that the only place she will be able to fully own herself—free from the control of men, the state, and religion is in death. Firdaus finds ultimate freedom in death. She is exercising control over her life and body, even in death, by declining the pardon. It makes a strong message about independence and self-reliance. Saadawi shows autonomy in death by Firdaus makes her last decision and takes back her life and body. Novelist also criticize on social control where her character Firdaus wants to free from outside ownership its only possible after death. That's known by Firdaus so she chooses death in place of surrender. Finally Firdaus declares her autonomy and individuality that took her in Existential victory. This idea is echoed in Firdaus' statement, "I am free" (p. 114).

The Voice of the Voiceless:

Firdaus turns her body from a "moribund object" into a "subjective" voice that reveals the harsh reality of women in patriarchal society by telling her life narrative to a female psychiatrist. Firdaus' story becomes a powerful act of defiance. Through her narrative, she evolves from a victim into a voice that reveals the harsh realities women face. This illustrates several key points: Reclaiming agency through narrative—Firdaus confronts social silencing by taking ownership of her story. Testimony and exposure—her words expose the brutal truths of patriarchal oppression. Change from object to subject—Firdaus asserts her individuality and humanity. Ultimately, her journey serves as an inspiration for others, encouraging them to challenge societal norms and seek their own empowerment. By sharing her truth, Firdaus not only liberates herself but also ignites a spark of resistance in those who hear her story.

Firdaus's story highlights the politics of identity by showing that her only path to becoming a fully human agent in an oppressive society is to relinquish her life, leaving her body as an empty vessel that the patriarchy can no longer dominate. This tragic choice underscores the harsh reality faced by many women who find themselves trapped in a system that values them only for their subservience. Ultimately, it raises profound questions about autonomy, sacrifice, and the lengths to which one must go to reclaim agency in a world that seeks to deny it.

Conclusion

The discussions that are highlighted are crucial for clearing the path for upcoming generations and highlighting the value of unity in the fight for equality. In the end, the story promotes group action, exhorting people to question the status quo and strive for a society that is more inclusive. This call to action resonates beyond the pages of the narrative, inspiring readers to reflect on their own roles in advocating for justice. By fostering empathy and understanding, we can build a community that not only supports but also amplifies the voices of those who have been marginalized. Through collective effort and shared experiences, we can create a brighter future where every individual feels valued and empowered. This journey toward equity requires commitment, open dialogue, and a willingness to confront uncomfortable truths. Woman at Point Zero is a powerful critique of patriarchal societies. Through Firdaus' journey, Saadawi exposes the brutal realities women face and highlights the struggle for autonomy and self-ownership. Egyptian women reclaiming agency seems, through Firdaus' narrative, a testament to women's resistance. It is a novel of critique of societal norms that also challenges patriarchal structure and elite hypocrisy. Moreover, it shows existential triumph, as Firdaus' death becomes her ultimate liberation. By choosing her own fate, Firdaus defies the constraints imposed on her, transforming her tragic story into one of empowerment. This act of defiance resonates deeply, offering inspiration to future generations of women who seek to challenge and dismantle the oppressive systems that seek to control their lives. Through her journey, the narrative not only sheds light on the pervasive injustices faced by women but also encourages a collective awakening. It serves as a powerful reminder that true freedom often lies in the courage to reject societal expectations and forge one's own path.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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