



**Contested Autonomy: Prostitution, Emotional Independence, and  
Male Contemplation in El Saadawi's Woman at Point Zero**

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**Abstract:**

*For centuries, the degradation of women and prostitution have been one of the major serious problems within the patriarchal society. In her novel Woman at Point Zero, Egyptian feminist writer Nawal El Saadawi offers a profound critique of patriarchal and economic oppression. The novel Woman at Point Zero is based on Nawal El Saadawi's encounter with Firdaus, a female prisoner awaiting execution for murder in Qanatir Prison, whom El Saadawi met while conducting research on neurosis among Egyptian women for her study Women and Neurosis in Egypt.*

*The story of Firdaus shows the plight of a woman - talking about the importance of financial independence as a way to control one's own life. El Saadawi poignantly talks about the theme of sexual assault and the world of prostitution from a middle - East common woman's perspective.*

*The study utilizes the document based analytical method for conducting the research.*

*There is no doubt that El Saadawi aptly presents the significance of a woman's independent life, mainly the role of financial independence, but it is too important to be emotionally independent at the same time. By using masculinist perspective in gynocriticism, this study seeks the answer of the question - how prostitution seems to be a downtrodden profession but, has similar meaning for any employer who works in different sectors.*

*The study presents how choosing prostitution as a means of financial independence does not merely reflect the plight of a wretched woman, but also in deep, is a revolt and revenge against patriarchal norms which shapes a woman within the stereotypes. Every human being is a prostitute as we all use our body to work and earn just the way prostitutes use their bodies in exchange for money. There exists no direct reflection of queer desire in the novel, but a critical examination reveals subtle narratives of queer possibility that emerge as forms of resistance against oppression.*

*Therefore, from Nawal's Firdaus character, the study examines queer possibility and discusses how the profession of prostitution is seen from a male perspective; how it becomes a need of respect and also a state of degraded world for women. Also, the study discusses the significance of emotional independence of a woman, which is as important as her financial independence. For every woman the relation with the outside world is completely transactional. The future direction of research is also provided.*

**Keywords:** *Emancipation, Emotional Independence, Gender, Nawal El Saadawi, Prostitution, Queer, Sexuality.*

## **Introduction:**

Idris, Talif, Termizi, and Jujar (2018) provides a masculinist critique, examining how women contribute to their own oppression and analysing the novel's call for women's agency and emancipation. Gohar (2016) argues that Nawal El Saadawi's novel transcends the story of a single woman to represent the systemic oppression faced by all women in Egyptian society. Gohar (2016) contends that the protagonist, Firdaus, is a "subaltern" (Hoare & Nowell-Smith, 1971; Morton, 2007) figure whose identity is shaped by a lifetime of physical and psychological exploitation, including humiliation, rape, incest, and violence. This relentless abuse leads her to view all human (male-female) relationships through the lens of a transactional and degrading client-prostitute dynamic using a comparative and analytical methodology, Quayoom (2017) constructed a theoretical framework to bridge the global divide among women. In the same study, Quayoom (2017) contends that systemic gender-based discrimination that transcends national and racial boundaries, produces a shared experience of structural and psychological pain that fundamentally binds them. Tugume (2021) examined Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* using her strand of feminist theory and explored the male-female gender dichotomy in the novel. Istifadah and Rohmana (2022) analysed patriarchal structures (Walby, 1989; 1990) using Sylvia Walby's six forms of patriarchy and Gramsci's theory by highlights physical, verbal, sexual abuse, marginalization, and exploitation of women. However, analysing queer desire, emotional independence, prostitution as a way of emancipation from societal boundaries are not deeply studied in the literature.

## **Objectives of the Study:**

- To analyse queer desire.
- To establish emotional independence as equally significant as financial independence in the holistic empowerment of women.
- To discuss the unseen oppression.
- To expand the idea of prostitution as a way of emancipation from societal boundaries.
- To explore stigma.

## **Analysing queer desire in *Woman at Point Zero*:**

While building on earlier feminist and gay/lesbian studies, the specific term "queer theory" (Halperin, 2003) was formally established when Teresa de Lauretis coined it for a pivotal 1990 conference at the University of California, Santa Cruz. The term was inspired by her hearing activists, street youth, and artists in late-1980s New York use "queer" in a defiant, gay-affirmative way (Halperin, 2003). Halperin (2003) argued that "queer theory" had to be invented after the fact to name a field that seminal texts like *Epistemology of the Closet* (Sedgwick, 1990) and *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1990) had already brought into being.

Nawal El Saadawi subtly explores queer desire and the societal framing of sexuality in *Woman at Point Zero*, particularly through Firdaus's complex relationship with her teacher, Miss Iqbal. This relationship becomes a pivotal yet perplexing space for Firdaus's early exploration of her identity and desires. Firdaus's intense emotional attachment to Miss Iqbal manifests in behaviour that puzzles her (El Saadawi 1975/2007, p.30). Firdaus obsessively discusses about her teacher Miss Iqbal with her friend Wafeya. Wafeya directly questions: "Firdaus, are you in love with Miss Iqbal? (El Saadawi, 1975/2007, p.31). Firdaus shocked reaction—"...but she's a woman. How could I be in love with a woman?" (El Saadawi, 1975/2007, p.32/ reflects Firdaus's profound internal conflict and implicitly critiques the community's rigid, heteronormative understanding of love and relationships.

Firdaus's desire refers to a nuanced interplay between sexual attraction and an underlying unresolved yearning for maternal nurturance. Firdaus's affective experiences lay outside conventional taxonomies, merging carnal desire with a profound hunger for the motherly love she was deprived of. Miss Iqbal's behaviour with Firdaus reflects crucial nuance. Miss Iqbal's initial, gentle physical contact implies permission (El Saadawi 1975/2007, p.30), but her subsequent retreat reveal her own internalized societal fears. Miss Iqbal treats Firdaus's devotion not as innocent affection but as a potentially sexual and therefore transgressive threat, mirroring the distance she would impose on a male suitor. Firdaus's journey toward sexual self-knowledge unfolds by two intersecting factors, namely, a patriarchal structure of extreme gender segregation, and a personal history marked by trauma. As a product of her sequestration within a single-sex (girl) educational institution, Firdaus's most significant emotional connections are with female. Her subsequent experiences, defined by exploitation and prostitution, cultivated a deep-seated resentment of men. The next logical question is: does her connection with her teacher Miss Iqbal represent an authentic awakening to queer desire, or is it, at least partly, a refuge from the pervasive male violence that defines her world? The lack of societal language or societal acceptance for her feelings is underscored by her explicit confusion: "How could I be in love with a woman?" (El Saadawi, 1975/2007, p.32). Ultimately, the feminist Writer Nawal El Sadaawi utilises Firdaus's experience to critique a segregated society that pathologizes natural human connection and forces women like Firdaus to navigate desire and identity without guidance or acceptance, leaving them profoundly isolated. Whereas Firdaus's relationship with her teacher Miss Iqbal offered a complex, ambiguous tenderness, her subsequent descent into prostitution serves, yet paradoxically clarifying, as a brutal pedagogy on the inextricable link between male desire and power.

Firdaus's experiences reflect how sexual control serves foundational mechanism of patriarchal power, systematically regulating female autonomy and bodily integrity, particularly through practices like female genital mutilation that operates not merely as a cultural ritual but as a violent tool of oppression to eliminate female sexual pleasure entirely (El Saadawi, 1975/2007, p.12). Within this context, any expression of desire that operates outside patriarchal control including same-sex intimacy reduces to inherently queer and subversive.

### **Emotional independence as equally significant as financial independence in the holistic empowerment of women:**

Patriarchy often makes sure of the fact that women must be confined within the emotions and physical boundaries which they have suggested, and called it ideal. They interestingly play with these suggested roles of a woman. Society never allows any woman to express her inner deep emotions, whether it is in her personal space or in public space. A woman who follows her soul's voice is a threat for patriarchy. Firdaus possesses that power that might tarnish the stereotypes.

Thanks to those core - hard women who raised their voices against these physical and psychological oppressions. One has to accept the fact that woman's pen is the most powerful weapon to fight. Whether it is

Mary Wollstonecraft (Wollstonecraft, 1792) from Britain, Tarabai Shinde (Shinde, 1882; Shinde & O'Hanlon, 1994), Rashsundari Devi (Tharu, & Lalita, 1991) from Indian subcontinent, Anne Hutchinson (Winship, 2005) or Elizabeth Cady Stanton (Davis, 2010) from America, and El Saadawi (Thampy, 2021) herself from Arab world wrote with firm voice against patriarchy openly. It is interesting to note, the writer of the novel, Nawal El Saadawi, is often regarded as 'Simon de Beauvoir' (Belhassine, 1992) of the Arab world.

Beauvoir aptly talks about the marginal position of women, calling [her] the 'Other' (de Beauvoir, 1949/2010, p.26). She starkly slaps upon the unmanly deeds of men, saying: "Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself" (De Beauvoir, 1949/2010, p.11). El Saadawi's Firdaus is the actual representation of the fact.

The novel explores the erosion of a woman's identity, a process catalysed by the relentless frustration of oppression. The lived experience of Firdaus enunciates Gerda Lerner's Creation of Patriarchy based on biological, sociological, psychological, and historical parameters (Lerner, 1986, pp.78-80). Sexuality in relation to sex and sex workers is keen to define the pivotal problems she faced throughout her life. Her judgment regarding the life of a woman overpowers the legal orders of judgment. The Judiciary and its death noose could not defeat her. Society often puts the interests of men over women. Pleasure of intercourse and other bodily desires are not only meant for men at the expense of women. To most extent, prostitution, for Firdaus, is an unstifled act of living.

El Saadawi's encounter with the female inmate in Qanatir Prison reveals the patriarchal ways and strategies to control a woman in the name of 'good' being. For men, a woman's emotions and desires are as cheap as her body which must be used in order to serve them. To Firdaus, such masculine traits make her oppose the authority. She is not an ordinary woman. She has the body and mind of her own which she utilizes very well.

Failure is not the defeat but the lost ability to fight back. From tender age to till death, Firdaus fought the war against oppressions. Her will power is her agency. In a patriarchal society power and capital of a woman are something which is not inherent, but mostly earned by her ownself.

### **The Unseen Oppressions:**

Nawal El Saadawi exposes the harsh realities. Though, by nature, a woman's body is her own capital, society means it only to fulfil the desires of others. 'Her' de facto is in contrast to 'her' de jure. Patriarchy creates archetypal society which could only collapse if a woman rejects her archetypal roles. The author chooses Firdaus as her heroine who denies to be an archetypal woman. Trauma, suppression, abusive actions against her develop her character from naive to veteran.

Limitations do not define femininity; whether it is the emotional limits of expression or limitations of her actions. Firdaus' professional sphere emancipates her from the realm of limitations and boundaries. Her life is reminiscent of the life of Moll Flanders (Defoe, 1722/2011). Daniel Defoe's encounter with the London criminal Moll King at Newgate Prison served as partial inspiration for his novel, The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders. Like Daniel Defoe, Nawal El Saadawi met the (convict) woman upon whom the novel "Woman at Point Zero" is based within the walls of prison (El Saadawi, 1975/2007, p.7).

Although time flies, the situation remains the same. Whether it's an eighteenth-century description of a woman's life or twentieth century life of a woman, circumstances remain parallel. The 'sexual politics' (Millett, 1970) argued that patriarchy systematically casts women into the role of a secondary, subordinate object for the benefit of male power (patriarchy). It explores the way how excessive degradation opens the

path of criminality - calling 'her' a criminal for the sake of hypocritical patriarchy and its reputation. It is not greed but lack of love and respect which pushes ones towards the profession of prostitution and other moral disintegrations.

In the novel, Firdaus initially takes the act of sex service as an immoral way of earning, but later she understands the hidden meaning of prostitution. Firdaus's traumatic past experiences of her prostitution pave the path to enlighten her against the falsified oppression of men in society. She was successfully able to unveil the pretended nature of man concealed with the disguised civilized version. It is the prostitution that teaches Firdaus how to stand independently not only in financial terms, but also mentally and psychologically. She learns as she earns- how to tackle her emotions. She shapes her own identity in her own way. The phallogentric judgements failed to define her. Economic liberation liberates her emotionally.

Emotional independence does not mean expecting or waiting for the right person, rather it is an idea of accepting oneself as it is; naturally. Sexuality in relation to emotional liberation denies the false conception of fake orgasm. Firdaus certainly enjoys her intimacy with Ibrahim. She falls in love with him. However, like all the other deceitful men he too abandons her. Diane E. Marting in her paper (Marting, 2001, p.179) talks about how writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez criticizes sex industry but not the worker working in unless they harm any woman.

El Saadawi questions upon male mindset who are often tempted to see only profit and gain- whether it is wealth or a woman's body. She asks who gives the right to these patriarchal men for deciding and categorizing a woman in terms of good or bad; fallen or angel like? She repines against the notion that looks sex work ignominiously, something downtrodden ill profession if it is chosen by her own will. Coelho (2004) in his novel "Eleven Minutes" touches on themes of female independence and agency. One must understand that such a profession is not a disrespectful field of work, but it is the thinking that makes it so. Many postmodern writers take prostitutes as the main heroine of their art to redefine the meaning of 'prostitution' and 'fallenness'. For instance, Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Fowles, 1969, p.423) highlights the idea of 'New Woman' instead of calling Sarah, a fallen one.

Each human being, whether man or woman, is a prostitute who works for earning through the utilization of their body and flesh. Men often take prostitutes as a source of self-pleasure. However, from a woman's point of view, it is more than this. For Firdaus, profession of prostitution is not the only way of earning wealth and capital but also a way to relinquish stereotypes that limits the sphere of profession for a working-class woman. A woman prostitute does not sit for pleasure. Giving sexual satisfaction by sacrificing one's own desires means a lot which every individual often underestimates.

Firdaus never enjoys sex throughout her journey in actual sense. She was exploited at an early stage of life. The exploitation changes her view of men. Through the life of Firdaus, Nawal El Saadawi appreciates the courage of a woman who goes against such rigid stereotypes- whether through mode of writing or standing naked against patriarchy. She poignantly highlights the power of nudity within the Hijab (black- covered) Arab world. Firdaus proves that the act of uncovering skin is not an act of shame, rather a way to cross the boundaries.

It is shameful to consider a successful woman's success as a result of sleeping with a successful man. In today's scenario many modern feminists thoroughly talk about such awful perceptions via active writings. The rise of feminism (Retta, 2020) with its different waves itself is a grand testimony of gender inequality.

Every rising woman is a threat for male domination. Any man who supports the idea of dominating a woman in any aspect, is the embodiment of Patriarchal values. Firdaus was sentenced to death not because she was convicted for murder charge but because she tried to throttle patriarchy itself. The question remains- why is



it often a man who decides the life and death of a woman, shaping [her] destiny through the clay of masculinity? Prostitution gives the agency to investigate 'her' body to understand her sexuality.

### Exploring Stigma in “Woman at Point Zero”:

Goffman's conceptualization of stigma (Goffman, 1963) in “Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity” remains the most authoritative and widely cited (p.3). Stigma (Goffman, 1963) refers to “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” that reduces someone “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (p. 3). Building on Goffman's foundational framework, Dudley (2000) adapted the concept for the field of social work, defining stigma as the stereotypes or negative judgments directed at individuals or groups whose characteristics or behaviours deviate from perceived social norms. Stigma refers to a mark of shame, disgrace, or disapproval that leads to rejection, discrimination, and exclusion from society (The World Health Organization, 2001).

Supremacy comes from power. And patriarchy gives power to those who support it. Firdaus, because she is a woman she judged as inferior - poor. In the denouement of the novel, El Saadawi challenges both power and patriarchy. Death cannot target Firdaus' unmovable thoughts to fight for her own existence. The tag of a prostitute provides her financial independence and independent way of living against patriarchy. She is financially, physically, emotionally, independent, like a flying bird. Emotional independence confers her confidence in order to survive in an oppressive world. She cannot fall until and unless she accepts the fall. Unlike any stereotypical woman, Firdaus possesses a separate 'Judith' (Woolf, 1929) within herself.

Woolf (2019) describes:

*Life for both sexes- and I look at them, shouldering their way along the pavement - is arduous, difficult, a perpetual struggle. It calls for gigantic courage and strength. More than anything, perhaps, creatures of illusion that we are, it calls for confidence in oneself.* (p.30)

A woman must need money in order to fight, needs her own separate individual space in order to write, indeed, in order to express and establish her own identity and individuality Firdaus' confined life is hard enough to express her gender. In her landmark work Memoirs from the Women's Prison (El Saadawi, 1983/1986, p.36), Nawal El Saadawi bears witness not only to her own unjust imprisonment but to the collective struggle of Egypt's female political detainees. El Saadawi, 1983/1986) weaponizes her voice against the prison authorities as follows:

*We will not die and if we die, we will not die in silence, we will not pass in the dark without passing an uproar. We have to get angrier and angrier, hitting the ground and shaking the heaven, we will not die without a revolution.* (p. 36)

*Woman at Point Zero* is not merely a fiction, but an actual record of an actual incident relating to every woman's life, practically a manifesto of revolution. Firdaus is a rebel. The poor, unsanitary circumstances marked her rebellious nature. Firdaus' life is a foundation of women's solidarity. Relinquishing presupposed socio- cultural expectations itself is building a new cultural realm where 'her' emancipation from oppression gives [her] new wings. Firdaus denies normative sexuality. Criticism plays a huge significant role for a woman to rise after the fall happens. For many women activists, criticism acts as a source of motivation to fight harder against each and every stereotype.

Through Firdaus, El Saadawi explores the mental issues affecting women. Because the novel is based on a true event, El Saadawi (1977/2007) boldly states:

“All women are victims of deception. Men impose deception on women and punish them for being deceived, force them down to the lowest level them for falling so 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 then chastise them with menial service for life, or insults, or blows”. (p. 94)

In a clear and nuanced way she shows predicaments of patriarchy; notions of disallowed education, sexual assaults, biological gender discrimination, and social inequalities. She asserts suppressing someone out of nothing brings maturity for the suppressive victim who crosses the boundary of tolerance. Therefore, tolerating suppression is nothing less than supporting oppression itself. One must learn to fight like Firdaus does. At a tender age Firdaus realizes the ways of the world. Her suppression brought maturity in her that surpasses her chronological age. She contemplates the two folds of prostitution - one, as a way of subjugation, in other sense, a way of liberation from every string that is associated with patriarchy. She achieves epiphany of self-realization after killing her pimp Marzouk to defend herself from being murdered by her pimp (El Sadaawi, 1977/2007, p.104).

The novel “Woman at Point Zero” (El Sadaawi, 1977/2007) defines the idea of ‘stigma’ in a new way. Prostitution is not a stigma rather it is the circumstances created by patriarchy that causes a woman to lean such a profession. She succumbs because she has no other option; she later uses this profession as her own shield and means of survival.

Gender equality is a game of body and mind. In order to stay strong both must run parallelly. In the novel Firdaus says:

“All women are prostitutes of one kind or another. Because I was intelligent I preferred to be a free prostitute, rather than an enslaved wife” (El Saadawi, 1975/2007, p.99). Her words indicate her emotional independence, not waiting for a messiah. The French feminist Helen Cixous noted the idea of passive woman and active men (Cixous, 1976) to speak out against it. There is no wrong to say prostitution as a key strategy to unpack the hidden and unseen power of patriarchy. El Saadawi defines the idealistic perception of choices. Speaking in Beauvoir’s tongue, Firdaus is not born but gradually becomes a woman by the society who moulds her to be submissive, passive, and mute. However, she refuses to be a typical role play woman.

There is an intrinsic relation between female empowerment and prostitution. Roxane Gay, writer of *The Bad Feminist* (Gay, 2014), in her opinion about women working in pornography says that it is the only place where women have better payment (Ryan, 2016) than men. Many anti- prostitution feminists view this as a tool of punishment for a woman, but it is also true that excessive oppression changes the scenario of punishment. In “Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison”, Foucault’s words (Foucault, 1977/1995, pp. 73-74) she no longer remains docile, ‘her’ oppression teaches her how to revolt- hunting their own hunters. Firdaus explicitly blames men and says “That men force women to sell their bodies at a price, and the lowest paid body is that of a wife” (El Saadawi, 1977/2007, p. 99). Firdaus’s peripheral roles in society helped her to know own worthiness and importance of ‘her’ existence in life.

The novel reveals how not only men but also the women often exploit another woman for the sake of falsified patriarchal values. Firdaus’s uncle and aunt instead of introducing her to books they mistreated her, abused her in every possible way. Whether it is Defoe’s Moll or Firdaus, in both cases their economic independence leads to their emotional emancipation. They develop a keen understanding of the ground realities. Each and every one of their bold steps in life is a critique against oppression.” Simple, but sharp and infuriating... *Woman at Point Zero* is the story of one Arab woman, but it reads as if it is every woman’s life” (*Spare Rib*, as cited in El Saadawi, 2007, p. i).

The system remains the same if a woman is a woman's enemy, but what if she supports her. Sharif's deception taught Firdaus the importance of trust and fellowship in life. Sisterhood plays a huge role in order to fight in unity. No matter from where she belongs every woman has a shared concern- to fight against patriarchal dominance. El Saadawi is criticizing the community that does not allow women to celebrate their sexuality. Like Rhys' Antoinette (Rhys, 1968), El Saadawi redefines the image of Firdaus where she is not a fallen prostitute but a free independent woman. Prostitution to a woman is a form of independence from man.

### **Conclusion:**

No doubt EL Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* is a polemic work. The retelling of Firdaus is an attempt to give her the voice, a voice that highlights the marginal and subaltern position of a woman in society. It is her independent emotional detachment that gives birth to the existential idea of living in nothingness. Her death is the door of another new journey. It is the death punishment that redeems her from physical and mental control of others. The profession which she chose is a critique of the patriarchal society. Prostitution is not simply a source of gratification but means of crossing the boundary- classifying one's individuality and rejecting to be categorized in terms of 'good' or 'bad'. EL Saadawi also shows the fact how the death penalty silenced every resistance.

The corpus represents a feminist consciousness in the social milieu, exposing the ordeals and championing emancipation in both financial and emotional level. The novel is the microcosm of the macrocosmic world, full of discrimination and politics. Firdaus' life delivers a lesson to every woman who must adhere to the path of independent life and having the sheer understanding of male contemplation regarding patriarchal judgements. Prostitution is one of the best ways to tackle the extremes of oppression, enabling 'her' to liberate from body and mind at both the private and public sphere. It turns the meaning of sex and sexuality.

In a broader perspective, prostitution transcends [her] limits, uplifting her from the garbage world of patriarchy. The only reason behind one's petty life is lack of love and respect. Yes indeed, money plays a vital role to provide necessary means of living and more money for luxurious living but it could not confer the strong independent emotions that one need in order to live. It solves the concept of stigma and concept of victimization. Psychological, emotional, and mental independence requires to stand firm physically and financially. It is much better to be self-dependent.

Although, prostitution is a controversial issue. In lieu, one has to look at it from a different perspective as a way to achieve financial and emotional independence. Hamilton (2009) writes: "Like the third wave, post-feminism is sometimes associated with phenomena such as consumerism, independence and individualism, and an emphasis on women's professional achievements, sexual pleasures and material acquisitions" (p.91).

Every earning woman adopts the consumerism ideology. In case of Firdaus, it is the profession of prostitution that make her realize regarding the power to control sex life. For centuries men used fictions to project the adultery side of a woman, but El Saadawi uses it to re-present her actual misconstrued sides. El Saadawi asserts what if 'she' supports 'she' - importance of sisterhood to break patriarchy. A woman is the decider of her own destination not the men who decides how the 'girl sex' should be like. Sex industry empowers and challenges patriarchy. Firdaus' life as a prostitute voices the act of rape and issue of genital mutilation.

A fruitful avenue for future research would be a comparative analysis of the mythological Yakshagana/ She-demons (Shaw & Pramanik, 2025) and the character of Firdaus, examining their connections to contemporary conceptions of self-identity (Erikson, 1994; Maehler & Hernández-Torrano, 2025).



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