The Cultural Impact and Issues of Female Genital Mutilation in Nawal El Saadawi’s Women at Point Zero

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Abstract: All over the world, women face gender inequity that leaves a physical and mental scar that is tough to eradicate. During the late nineteenth century, women were confined to their homes and treated differently than men. Women are aware of their value and are still fighting for their rights for a long time because they have not achieved their desirable place yet. Though this bias against women is outdated, it varies from country to country. Arab women writer Nawal El Sadawi’s Women at Point Zero (WPZ) is the first woman to address genital mutilation through her novels publicly. The novel comprises sex, love, marriage, productivity, and divorce. This is because women were distinguished by rules and culture two centuries ago in Egypt. The novel Women at Point Zero analyzes the devaluation of the female gender. Therefore, it reveals the fact that men are still dominating women. In all her novels, the principal characters differ in background, status, education, and upbringing. But they all possess similar traits: all women who have been abused and oppressed in some way or another by their respective society that endeavors to project women as incapable and weak. Hence this article entitled “The Cultural Impact and Issues of Female Genital Mutilation in Nawal El Saadawi’s Woman at Point Zero” creates a bridge to close the void that women are united regardless of different countries or races they belong to, through the agony that causes gender-based discrimination.

Keywords: Gender Discrimination, Womanism, Female circumcision, domestic violence, Egyptian Society

I. INTRODUCTION

Nawal El-Saadawi has always been a controversial feminist writer. Her novels have been prohibited in Egypt. Despite these restrictions, El Saadawi, has published nearly twenty-seven books in genres, including non-fiction, fiction, plays, and short stories. El Saadawi’s Women at Point Zero, published in 1983, recounts the life story of Firdaus and depicts the condition of Arab women in Egyptian society. Firdaus, the novel's principal character, describes her story as filled with misery and pain inflicted upon her by the men in her life and society. Nawal El-Saadawi, through her novel, demonstrates that women in Arab society are highly oppressed and culturally suppressed in Islamic society. As Abdullahi Kadhir Ayinde states: An exposition of gender violence in the Afro-Arab environment requires an understanding of the cultural matrix, which involves the synthesis of Islam and Indigenous culture and the hybridity brought to the convergence by the harsh reality of modernity. (154, A Sociological Critique of Gender Violence)

Firdaus narrates her story to the writer El- Saadawi by throwing light on different phases of life widespread in Arab society, which supports women in aspects of Education, Female genital mutilation, domestic violence, prostitution, and self-emancipation. El-Saadawi demonstrates the adversity and anguish faced by ordinary Arab women who becomes the sufferers of patriarchal norms imposed on them. Using Firdaus’ conflicts and struggles against the male dominance mentioned in the novel and the battle with her Egyptian government, El-Saadawi establishes a discrete line between society and the individual.

The novel narrates the story of Firdaus, who suffers and struggles against the society that persecutes her at every phase of her life. Saadawi states that “She (Firdaus) is an orphan who was passed from one abusive guardian to another, and her tale shows how trust is tested and finally erodes, leaving behind only fear and alienation” (5, WPZ).

Born to a lower-class peasant family, her father mistreated her, and underwent circumcision at a young age. Firdaus had encountered pain throughout her life, and every man who entered her life exploited her only for sexual pleasure and fulfillment. She was raped frequently and tortured physically and mentally by various male characters in the novel. The men in the society also used her body.

Though Firdaus received a secondary school certificate, she could not continue her education. She says, “With my secondary certificate and suppressed desires, I belonged to the ‘middle class. By birth, I was lower class’(10). To earn some power, Firdaus eventually turns to prostitution. Hence, the novel portrays the conflict of an Egyptian woman
named Firdaus, imprisoned for murder. But Firdaus did not demand lifetime confinement; instead, she prefers hanging to death as she feels that her death would be a relief and a step towards liberation.

II. FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION:

Female Genital Mutilation is the curse to women that exist in society. This is practiced in almost all the African and Middle-East countries. Throughout the novel, Firdaus goes through the unending cycle of domination imposed by men. She moves from the position of a daughter to that of a wife, to a prostitute, to an office employee, and finally returns to prostitution. Firdaus remembers the awful experience of her encounter with Clitoridectomy, a process she was made to do in her early childhood.

Firdaus was denied sexual pleasure. The works of El strongly influenced Lebanese educator and writer Evelyn Accad-Saadawi. Thus, she states that “sexuality seems to have a revolutionary potential so strong that many political women and men are afraid of it” (2005, p. 3). Women's bodies are dominated by patriarchal culture, which denies them from doing sex and makes them fearful of their sexual bodies. Firdaus is constantly in pain because of her circumcision; therefore, she cannot enjoy sexual pleasure. Firdaus is haunted by the physical and mental anguish caused by circumcision for the rest of her life.

This is demonstrated by her remembering this suffering so vividly that she describes it before she dies. She discloses El Saadawi that her mother “brought a woman who was carrying a small knife or maybe a razor blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from between [her] thighs” (p. 12). As a result, she cried the entire night. This method is unsanitary and does not include anesthesia. Circumcision is regarded as a religious rite; however, it is not a component of Islam, despite its long association.

In Firdaus’s society, when a young girl reaches the stage of puberty, she must undergo the process of female genital mutilation to reduce the sexual pleasure of women. This process is done to forbid temptation from having extramarital sex. Besides the stress caused by clitoridectomy, Firdaus recalls rape as male family members harassed her regularly. As a victim of subjugation, Firdaus fails to experience the pleasure involved in marriage or having sex. Her sole option for reclaiming her lost personality and ruined sexuality is to resort to violence.

Firdaus was affected terribly by her unrequited love. While at school, she is suppressed by heterosexism. Firdaus shows lesbian desires, but Egyptian law and culture are against homosexuality; this illustrates how the hegemonic factors play a role in regulating women.

She is attracted by her teacher Iqbal and eventually falls in love with him. But she is not courageous enough to disclose it to him. She later deprived herself of the opportunity to love the man she adored. Ibrahim, a coworker, deceives and fools Firdaus by claiming to love her. She eventually discovers that he only uses her body and does not love her. Firdaus experiences intense pain and takes steps to work as a prostitute because she declares that “a successful prostitute was better than a misled saint” (El Saadawi, 1983, p. 82). Nevertheless, she does not take revenge on Ibrahim because she has confined and compressed all her angst which reflects when she later murders her pimp, symbolic of patriarchal oppression.

III. PROSTITUTION AND SELF-EMANCIPATION:

Firdaus met Bayoumi, who misused her in the name of a job and took her back to his home, where he began to look after her. Firdaus believed him unthinkingly and thought that he loved her. Later, they were involved in physical intercourse. Bayoumi comes home in night. But one day, she realized that the body was different; it was heavy. When she asked him who he was, she got a reply that how does it matter to her? Bayoumi made her a prostitute and kept her to earn money without even letting her know. He locks her in the apartment when he leaves and beats her a lot. She was utterly subjugated, but she managed to escape from there with the help of a neighbor.

This, however, was not the end of her struggles. As she was resting on the bench near the river Nile, distressing about her life, she met a woman who appeared elegant and from a privileged class. The woman named Sharifa enquired who had done this to her. Firdaus was shocked when she got the men’s names; she even mentioned Bayoumi. She took her to her apartment and explained that her body was not free and that she could earn enough by using it.

Sharifa changed her into a high-class prostitute, and Firdaus could not resist it as she was fascinated with money and the luxury that Sharifa provided her. But in reality, Sharifa was also using her only to earn money which she later realized when a man named Fawzy came and revealed the truth. She escaped from Sharifa’s place and reached the lonely street as it was already night. Any man could follow a girl when she was walking alone in the street, and Firdaus also experienced the same. But the irony is that the man who followed her was a policeman. And the worst part was that he took her and agreed to offer her money, but he did not give her anything.

At this point, she realized she could also be a prostitute to make a living without relying on others. This is a fantastic example of fifth-wave feminism, which teaches women that prostitution is not a curse but a legitimate way to make a living, just like any other career. Firdaus became famous and started charging more money than other
prostitutes. She lived in a big apartment, ate delicious food, and discovered ways of leading a materialist life that everything can be accomplished with money. She also made friends, and the most significant part was that she had a library in her flat, so she could read anytime she wanted without any obstructions. Yet, fate intervened once again, and her friend, who was a journalist, accused her by saying that she was not a respectable woman.

This distressed her so profoundly that she was deeply hurt inside, and now her goal in life was to be a decent and reputable woman. She quit prostitution and applied for a job with her secondary school certificate. Eventually, she got selected by a company and lived in a tiny apartment to live with honor. While working, she realized that the situation of employed women was still awful. They were constantly observed and haunted by men, and the worst part was that they were paid poorly despite doing the same amount of labor. But Firdaus defended herself against all these men and sincerely performed her work. And eventually, she fell in love with a man in the same office who admired her, and her dream of marrying and achieving the status of a respectable woman was about to come true. She was pretty content, but fate intervened again in her life. The man she loved got married to the chairman’s daughter to get promoted in his career. This affected her wholly and emotionally obliterated her. Now she abandoned the idea of being a dignified woman and began her career as a prostitute again. This was the turning point in her life when she decided that being a prostitute was better than being a wife. She has constantly been caged and unable to do anything on her own. At least prostitutes have their own lives and can choose what they want. Firdaus became a famous prostitute and lived her life as she desired. But a woman can never live peacefully in society, and the same situation occurs. A man named Marzouk entered her life and compelled her to keep him as her pimp. When she denied it, he caused her enough trouble. She went to seek help from the police, where she realized that Marzouk had more contacts than her, and she had no other way but to accept him as her pimp. One day he tried to develop physical intimacy with Firdaus, and when she opposed it, it turned into a big fight. She had no choice other than to kill him. So, finally, she killed him with the knife. Though Firdaus was stunned, she was so relieved by murdering her pimp Marzouk because she felt she took revenge, at least on one of the men in her life who only used her. For the first time, she felt she was standing up for her right as a woman. Firdaus faced so many hardships in her entire life. She points out that she will be free after entering the prison.

The most enthralling aspect was that Firdaus shared her story with the writer on the day of her execution, even though she knew the writer would not be able to help her with her execution. She wished to get rid of this male-dominated society and had a quest to shift to a place devoid of all men. It isn’t very good to see that Islam, a noble religion that gives equal rights and status to women, has been influenced and depicted so that it deprives women of these rights. And it is the mistake of all the men who misuse and exploit religion for their convenience to dominate women. Women like Firdaus must make such decisions to break male chauvinism. For Firdaus:

A prostitute, however, is a little better off. I convinced myself I had chosen this life of my own free will. The fact that I rejected (men’s) noble attempts to save me, my insistence on remaining a prostitute, proved to me this was my choice and that I had some freedom, at least freedom to live in a situation better than that of other women. (89)

As a result of society’s revenge, Firdaus suffers tremendously from the clutches of men, which torments her completely. As one final act of killing, she accepts her death happily, believing it is the only possible way to be liberated. Firdaus’ entire life was under the control of someone else. She attempts to prove that she is better than the men in her idealized world. She hated these men and felt she would be liberated from them only in death.

IV. SUMMATION:

Women at Point Zero reveal that women have been making ceaseless efforts to destabilize the stereotypical roles dictated by their society. Firdaus is an example of a liberated woman who breaks the conventions and the hegemonic strands to be released into a male-free environment to experience the free air and live a pain-free individual. They are achievers the world should look up to as forerunners of such a cause for true liberation. El-Saadawi proves that the novel’s protagonist is a powerful and delusive woman who represents the post-feminist world. She attempts to witness a change in the minds of all women through their portrayal of the characters who experience pain but surface out of it and live a life filled with joy.

WORKS CITED:

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