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Incarcerated Power: Tracing Foucault's Footsteps in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*

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Abstract

Many researchers have approached Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* from different perspectives; however, little has been done to show the complexity of the main character, Firdaus, and her transformation through the story. The present study focuses on the process of character transformation from what may seem to be a state of misery to that of disobedience and heroic resistance. Foucault's theory of power, as followed by the third-wave feminists, can shed further light on the dynamic change in the personality of the central character. The study reveals that the laws in a patriarchal society, the protagonist's lack of awareness, and her irresistible fears are the main reasons for her predicaments. The study also shows that the main character, Firdaus, as a free subject, is not always a passive recipient of power but from time to time, she also makes her presence felt. By telling her story, she tries to share her idiosyncratic form of *power* with other women and inspire them in their struggles against social inequality and male chauvinism.

Keywords

Foucault – power – resistance – third-wave feminism – *Woman at Point Zero*

Introduction

Nawal El Saadawi, known as a rebellious Arab woman, constantly attempted to be the women's voice through her books. She addressed the unsatisfactory situation of women based on her personal life and her professional experience as a physician and psychiatrist. She never stopped complaining about the normalization of women's docility in a patriarchal society and the physical and mental pains they had to bear. All her life, she tried to make people conscious of the necessity to reform women's situation, especially, in religious countries where power is the property of men who are protected by law, traditions and religion. She was in strict opposition with all traditions and rules based on which a woman was regarded as a worthless creature and inferior to man. The writer of the well-known book, *Woman at Point Zero* (El Saadawi, 1983), left a valuable legacy for the world. Her other books include *Two Women in One* (El Saadawi, 2014), *The Hidden Face of Eve* (El Saadawi, 2007) and *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* (El Saadawi, 2001).

Nawal El Saadawi wrote *Woman at Point Zero* in 1974 based on the story of a woman called Firdaus who was in jail for murdering a pimp (a man) in an act of self-defense and was sentenced to death. In one of her visits to Qantir prison as the prison psychiatrist, she got to know Firdaus who at first refused to talk to her; however, close to her execution, she accepted to narrate her story. But why is El Saadawi, so impressed by the story of this woman, who has no regret for what she has done, and calls her exceptional? Why has this story become one of her most celebrated works? Why does she call her a hero in the book?

El Saadawi (1983) believes that this despairing woman, despite her misery, evokes in all those who read her story a need to challenge and overcome those forces that deprive women, as human beings, of their inalienable rights. That is why many women in Egypt and all around the world can relate to Firdaus' story (El Saadawi, 1983). She gives them hope by telling her story and speaking the unspoken, sending the message Enough is Enough and the fact that the silence needs to be broken for change to happen. She implicitly teaches them resiliency despite the difficulties that they have to undergo because of being a woman. She shows them that the tyranny is not going to be stopped miraculously unless they know their rights as human beings, believe in their power and assert themselves.

Since this creative non-fiction is regarded as a bedrock piece for feminism, many researchers have written about it. However, nearly all the available articles have pictured the protagonist as an oppressed victim, ignoring the rebellious and resistant part of her personality. Balaa (2018) believes that

El Saadawi, at times, employs Orientalist stereotypes but, at other times, challenges them. Hidayati *et al.* (2018) use Foucault's theory of power relations in their research and briefly mention that both those who exert power and those who are subjected to power take advantage of each other. However, that study mainly focuses on the issue of violence toward Firdaus.

No research provides us with information regarding the complexity of the main character and why, at times, she takes the passive role of the traditional obedient woman who is oppressed and, every now and then, becomes uncharacteristically aggressive and violent. To analyze this character and her behavior, we intend to base our argument on Foucault's theory of power and feminism to provide a better understanding of the power exercised on and by this character.

The main character is multifaceted with layered personalities, desires and motivations that cannot readily be explained through early feminist ideas while fitting well into third-wave feminist ideology. Theoretical perspectives from feminist ideologies, coupled with Foucault's theory of power, enhance our awareness of how power influences our sense of self, our perspectives and our actions, thereby, enabling diverse forms of personal transformation. This is exactly what happens to the main character of the story.

A Foucauldian-Feminist Approach

Although Foucault has not explicitly mentioned women in his works, many feminists have been inspired by his theory of power. Feminist analysis closely examines the dynamics of power, exploring the means through which men assert dominance over women on both individual and collective scales (Bell, 1993). The notion of the locality of power arises from the fact that men attempt to maintain dominance not just within the broader societal framework but also in daily interpersonal interactions. The concept of the locality of power is popular among feminists who have attempted to construct models of gender-power relations, refusing to look at power as something located in institutions (Mills, 2003).

McNay believes Foucault's non-essentialist concept of body and self-determining individual reject passivity and victimization as a product of patriarchy (qtd. in Ransom, 1994). Foucault challenges the notion that women are passive recipients of patriarchal oppression, emphasizing instead the active role individuals play in crafting their own identities and life narratives. Although this idea may seem unrealistic and subject to debate as structural

constraints may still limit the extent of individual autonomy, it attracts our attention to the potential for individual empowerment despite the challenges that society may pose.

Weedon believes that with the help of Foucault's view on power, we can discover various forms of power in society to confront, challenge and change them (qtd. in Bunting, 1992: 833). Firdaus, early in her childhood, realizes the presence of forces surrounding her in her parents' relationship with each other, with their children and with others. Later, upon entering every new relationship, she becomes more engaged in these power relations, more aware and more determined to contest them. In this regard, the Foucauldian approach seems to be particularly accommodating in addressing women's oppression both in their public and private aspects of life (Bunting, 1992).

In broader terms, Bell (1993) refers to sexuality, power and knowledge as the most common points in Foucault and feminism. She mentions that feminists have been interested in discussing sexuality and the way it can be used to control women. Even if we refuse to consider sexuality as the main site of women's oppression, it certainly is a significant oppressive means (Bell, 1993). What Foucault offers feminists through his concept of power and power/knowledge is a way to envision all kinds of power relations in societies and to challenge them. It includes power not only at the broader socio-cultural level but also in the most private and intimate relationships.

While there is a temptation to call Firdaus "domesticated", we need to reconceptualize the meaning of "domesticated" in power relations based on Foucault and third-wave feminists to fit her into a Foucauldian feminist view. Power relations are more complicated than the traditional definition of the oppression of women by men in a patriarchal society and that is how Foucault helps feminists develop a more complex and comprehensive analysis of power.

Foucault refuses the old definition of power which he calls the "repressive hypothesis" and, instead, he considers power as something productive, something that produces different forms of behavior and events, rather than a restrictive tool for constraining individuals (Mills, 2003). He frees power from its traditional definition as "property" and defines it as a "material" that is not possessed as a privilege of a certain class and a burden on those who lack it but as an act that can be exercised (Foucault, 1979): "[Power] invests them, is transmitted through them, it exerts pressure upon them just as they in their struggle against it resist the grip it has on them." (Foucault, 1979: 26–7). Foucault does not consider power as something at the top, instead, he believes power arises from below and there is no binary opposition to power relations (Foucault, 1978: 94).

Similarly, third-wave feminists also do not approve of early feminists' adherence to the traditional view of power as the possession of the powerful (man) to oppress the powerless (woman) and force them into specific actions (Mills, 2003). It is a simplistic idea to associate men with power and portray women as absolute victims of male domination. Women take roles such as a domesticated wife or a prostitute in particular relations and, by releasing themselves from those relations, they give an end to those roles (Rubin, 1975). Women also exercise power where they have the opportunity or in the form of resistance to the power exercised by men (Bell, 1993). Therefore, as Hartsock states, currently, a good number of feminists question the simple powerful/powerless division (qtd. in Bell, 1993: 41).

For Foucault, power does not necessarily mean dominating and domination is not something at the heart of power, rather, power is exercised upon the dominant and the dominated at the same time (qtd. in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: 186). But, he does not deny the existence of domination and that certain individuals/groups can exert more power and for a longer time; power relations are not symmetrical (Gordon, 2018). However, rather than classifying people into groups of powerful and powerless, Foucault asks us to look for "the patterns of modifications which the relationships of force imply by the very nature of their process" (Foucault, 1978:99). Third-wave feminists depart from the binary categorization of men and women as dominators and the subjugated as posited by earlier feminist discourse; instead, they critically analyze such simplistic dichotomies that uniformly cast women as lacking power and men as wielding it, challenging the notion of power as a gender-specific attribute (Montoro, 2014).

A critical concern to address here is the methodology of power utilization; This involves not just recognizing its existence but understanding the mechanisms through which it is enacted as well as the consequences that emerge from the exertion of power by one party over another (Foucault, 1982: 786). When we decide to answer this "how", it is necessary to understand power relations in the "diversity of their logical sequence, their abilities, and their interrelationships" (Foucault, 1982: 788). Foucault insists that all relations between people are power relations and, in each relation, people are exercising power and establishing their position in a hierarchy that is not stable and not necessarily well-defined (qtd. in Mills, 2003: 46–7). This unstable notion of power results in a question regarding the fixed roles of individuals in their relations. Hence, the focus ought to shift from solely delineating power to considering the role of the individual within power dynamics. It is therefore crucial to explore whether Firdaus is merely a subject of oppression or if she plays an active part in wielding power within her relationships with others.

According to Foucault, power must be understood as a mode of action upon the actions of others (Foucault, 1982). When considering the relationship between power and freedom, it is essential to acknowledge that power is exercised over free subjects and, hence, freedom is integral to the concept of power. Foucault states that freedom is “the condition for the exercise of power (and precondition, since freedom must exist for power to be exerted, and also its permanent support, since without the possibility of resistance, power would be equivalent to a physical determination)” (Foucault, 1982: 790). Therefore, there exists a symbiotic relationship between power and freedom where one’s refusal to submit underscores this very interconnection (Foucault, 1982).

Indeed, Falzon *et al.* (2013) assert that engagement in power relations does not necessarily equate to domination; Instead, actions such as resistance, insubordination, counter-conduct and ethical subjectivation are forms of exercising freedom. These activities represent a dynamic interaction with power, embodying the practice of freedom even within the context of pervasive power relations (Falzon *et al.*, 2013). Firdaus is not trapped in a master-slave relationship; she is a free individual who chooses to stay, to run away, to tolerate or to kill. She exerts power through her sexuality, her resistance, her discourse and her silence. She attempts to change the forces that have affected her and destroy the agents that limit her freedom.

As such, Firdaus’ own interpretation of freedom centers on liberating herself from the fears spawned by her internalized sense of powerlessness. Her perspective reframes the notion of enslavement, suggesting that her captivity is not imposed by external forces but rather by her own fears. This introspective view underscores a personal journey toward empowerment through overcoming internal barriers, reflecting an intricate understanding of the relationship between power, freedom and self-perception. After murdering Marzouk, she says:

I have triumphed over both life and death because I no longer desire to live, nor do I any longer fear to die. I want nothing. I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. Therefore, I’m free. For during life, it is our wants, our hopes, and our fears that enslave us. The freedom I enjoy fills them with anger. They would like to discover that there is after all something which I desire, fear, or hope for. Then they know they can enslave me once more. (El Saadawi, 1983: 110).

The further we go in the story, the more certain we become of the critical role of fear in all her relations. The fear has been instilled in her from her childhood to turn her into a good woman. Free from that fear, she can be transformed into

someone else and act differently; however, it is not easy to reach that level and release herself of the fears as we will later mention in discussing her relations with men.

Firdaus and Resistance

It is necessary to resort to a practical way to investigate power relations which consists of applying resistance in confrontation with power. Foucault compares resistance to a chemical catalyst to clarify power relations, their site, their application point and the techniques applied (Foucault, 1982: 780). He analyzes power relations through the antagonism of strategies, not from the point of view of internal rationality. He suggests that to understand power, first, we should understand the forms of resistance (Foucault, 1982). Following his definition of power as never total, uniform or smooth but shifting and unstable, he states that

where there is power there is resistance; there is no single locus of great refusal but a plurality of resistance, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. (Foucault, 1978: 95–6).

For Foucault, power and resistance are not separable; power exists when resistance is possible and resistance is not out of “the strategic field of power relations” (Foucault, 1978: 96). Resistance is indeed more difficult under domination but it is not impossible; there is no absolute domination that destroys freedom and, in fact, it is the freedom that gives meaning to the exercise of power. Therefore, Foucault’s analysis introduces a new concept of active resistance which means everyone exercises resistance in the local mode and acts freely within that context (Gordon, 2018). Foucault’s resistance theory allows feminists to challenge sexuality and sexual violence and that mostly women from minorities or not well-off backgrounds are affected by power structures. By assuming that there is no central site of power and, similarly, no central site of resistance, numerous types of resistance can arise, including resistance exclusively for marginalized women who face certain types of challenges (Gordon, 2018).

By dropping the defensive guard of looking at women as merely oppressed, we can see how Firdaus challenges the stereotypes attributed to genders.

Firdaus reaches a point where she identifies herself as a successful prostitute – sought after, commanding high prices and exercising choice over her clients. This reflects a distinct form of empowerment and agency within the constraints of her societal context and personal history. It demonstrates a complex interplay between empowerment, economic independence and the reclaiming of autonomy over her own body and choices, set against the backdrop of the profession she occupies (El Saadawi, 1983). With a more careful reading of the story, we can see that not only men but also other women exert their power over Firdaus. Her mother, in the first place, her uncle's wife, her teacher and her friend, Sharifa, all had a key role in her oppression; we will discuss this more later on. It is undeniable that due to the hierarchy of power, she is sometimes situated in a vulnerable position. However, by separating herself from submissive women who obey, tolerate and do not try to change their fate, she continuously takes the position of someone powerful who resists, escapes and tries to transform her life. Moreover, by freeing herself from the position of a tender woman who cannot work, who cannot protect herself and who cannot kill, she takes a new identity frowned upon in a patriarchal society not only by men but also by other women.

Firdaus is resistant in her relations with others; her refusal to surrender is evident in different stages of her life. Rather than focusing on what she is, she focuses on refusing what she is and always fantasizes about what she could be to free herself from this dilemma. Secondly, with respect toward this goal, she strives to gain her absolute right to live as a human, to have control over her body, to benefit from physical and mental health, to be happy, to satisfy her desires and instead of being oppressed and marginalized, to find the right to rediscover who she is and who she can be.

Firdaus dreams not about marrying but about going to Al-Azhar to study (El Saadawi, 1983: 14), a place where only men can go. She criticizes her situation in her family and redefines her identity in relation to them. She talks about her childhood when she always thought to herself, "Who am I? Who is my father? Am I going to spend my life sweeping the dung out from under the animals, carrying manure on my head, kneading dough, and baking bread?" (El Saadawi, 1983: 15) The roles that were considered normal for girls did not fit in the life she wanted. She is aware of this difference when she says: "I knew that women did not become heads of state, but I felt that I was not like other women nor like the other girls around me who kept talking about love or men." (El Saadawi, 1983: 25).

Firdaus acknowledges the pervasive patriarchy, yet, contrasts this by consciously leveraging her intelligence to subvert that domination. She opts for a path where she transforms oppressive male power into a productive force for her own benefit, thereby, crafting a life of her own design within the restrictive

frameworks imposed upon her. Rather than marrying and taking the role of an enslaved housewife who gives her body for nothing and tolerates humiliation, she prefers to be a free prostitute who has control over her body. Even in using her sexuality to exert power, she has her way; she uses passivity to be resistant as at the end of the story where she describes her body as “strong enough to retreat, powerful enough to resist” (El Saadawi, 1983: 106).

Firdaus exerts influence not only through her frank and fearless speech but also strategically utilizes silence to command power, navigating both expression and restraint as tools of control. Silence is part of all discourse and all communication (Foucault, 1978) and her resistant silence at the end of the story is not out of oppression or fear but as a result of agency (Rowe and Malhotra, 2013). As an example, when she is asked to write a letter to the president asking him to pardon her for her crime, she refuses and says, “I don’t want to be released and I want no pardon for my crime.” (El Saadawi, 1983: 110). She believes she is powerful when she has the power to choose even if that choice is committing a crime, even if it is her own death: “Dying in this way for the crime she had chosen to commit would fill her with pride, something that would make her hold her head high, higher than the heads of everyone else, especially kings, princes and rulers.” (El Saadawi, 1983: 111). At the same time when she decides to express what she considers truth, she is directly proving herself as a powerful individual who has no fear:

I am speaking the truth now without any difficulty. For the truth is always easy and simple. And in its simplicity lies a savage power. ... and to have arrived at the truth means that one no longer fears death. For death and truth are similar in that they both require great courage if one wishes to face them. And the truth is like death in that it kills. When I killed I did it with my truth not with a knife. That is why they are afraid and, in a hurry, to execute me. They do not fear my knife. It is my truth which frightens them. This fearful truth gives me great strength. (El Saadawi, 1983: 112).

She also takes the stance of power by remaining silent and resistant to the author who insists on talking to her. She has the power to either be silent or tell her story which she finally narrates. By sharing her story, she is telling the story of a great number of women and becomes their mouthpiece: a powerful, fearless voice.

Mills’s interpretation of Foucault’s model (discussed in Mills, 2003) suggests that power is a dynamic interplay rather than a static hierarchy. Individuals engage actively, constantly negotiating and often resisting the matrix of domination; hence, power is not simply imposed from above but is contested and reshaped from below (Mills, 2003). This conception recognizes

the omnipresence of resistance within the framework of power relations. Resistance is an exercise of power, a revolutionary act (Foucault, 1978) that should not be underestimated in power relations. By challenging anything that contributes to the normalization of certain behavior with the aim of women's oppression, feminists resist the exertion of power. They resist the phallographic power which is a form of domination from above and instead turn toward power as the capacity to change, transform and empower. Firdaus resorts to different forms of resistance to take advantage of the power relations she is involved in; by silence or speaking up, by acting or staying passive, by fighting and by giving up.

Firdaus in Relation to Men

Firdaus' relation to men evidently plays a key role in shaping her life, behavior and identity. She never misses a chance to blame them for what they are and what they do with women. She knows no exception when she says, "I am saying that you are criminals, all of you: the fathers, the uncles, the husbands, the pimps, the lawyers, the doctors, the journalists, and all the men of all professions." (El Saadawi, 1983: 108). In the following part, we have tried to look at her key relationship with the men in the story to show how these men exert power on her and how she is placed in these power relations.

Within a patriarchal society, the father figure is often the primary agent who introduces the concept of power to a child, occupying a position that mirrors a God-like role within the family structure. Firdaus mostly describes her father in relation to her mother, a master-slave relationship where the slave does everything to satisfy the master. It is through this father that she first learns about the hierarchy of gender and her inferiority as a girl who should accept that men's wishes would come first. This father exists in all other men who later come into her life and who only change names but they are the same in nature and position, at the top of the hierarchy; she unintentionally becomes her mother and imitates her actions in her early relations with men. This is the main reason that she feels hatred not only toward her father but also her mother. She does not regard her mother as oppressed but as someone who contributed to this master-slave relationship. She is resistant to accepting them as her parents and her life with them as her life: "in a home which was not mine, from a father who was not my father, from a mother who was not my mother" (El Saadawi, 1983: 15). Later, she admits that she hated mirrors because she saw herself in it, a creature who looked like her dead parents who lived in her (El Saadawi, 1983: 20).

The first man who has a critical role in Firdaus' life is her uncle whom she describes as "closer than my father" (El Saadawi, 1983: 18). Her uncle appears as the groper who, at the same time, educates her and treats her well. He then takes her custody following her parents' death and continues his abusive actions. However, we should be cautious in calling this relationship abusive since there is no complaint from Firdaus' side; on the contrary, she shows a pleasure-seeking submission and love for whom she describes as kind and caring.

In El Saadawi's narrative, Sheikh Mahmood is Firdaus' older husband to whom she is forcibly married. He is depicted as sexually abusive, financially controlling and prone to unjustified violence towards Firdaus, exemplifying the oppressive dynamics of their marriage (El Saadawi, 1983: 46). Firdaus is resistant in her relationship with her husband as can be inferred from her husband's word who says "why do you shy away from me? Why do you turn your face away from mine ... why do you keep at a distance whenever I come near to you?" (El Saadawi, 1983: 47). However, Sheikh Mahmood is a typical husband in a patriarchal society who provides the wife with food and, in return, the woman is required to submit her body, do the chores and bring up children. When Firdaus uses resistance in her relationship with him, he uses violence to turn her into a submissive woman.

After her first beating, Firdaus attempts to resist by leaving Sheikh Mahmood and seeking help from her uncle. But she is sent back, with her uncle and his wife reinforcing her oppression by convincing her that "a virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband" (El Saadawi, 1983: 46–7). Yet, after being put back in the same situation, she chooses passivity. She states, "I surrendered my face to his face and my body to his body, passively, without any resistance ..." (El Saadawi, 1983: 47). Whether she admits it or not, her passivity in her marital relationship *is* a kind of resistance as she leaves her body but not her soul. She wants to show that she never accepted to be the wife whom she was expected to be nor did she fit into the mold of a traditional wife. Her passivity is an act of resistance against expected behavior or norms implying that unconventional responses such as not reacting as expected can be a deliberate act of defiance or opposition.

El Saadawi portrays Bayoumi as a seemingly benevolent figure who emerges in Firdaus' life as a "protector". Offering her a place to stay and refraining from physical violence, he presents a contrast to Sheikh Mahmood. Firdaus' interactions with Bayoumi, particularly, sexual relations, are not characterized by the abuse she experienced before; instead, she seeks to find pleasure in them (El Saadawi, 1983: 51). He is good to her until Firdaus refuses to go on living in his house and says that she wants to find a job and Bayoumi "starts

beating and insulting her" (El Saadawi, 1983: 52). Following that, he locks her in the house and gets into the habit of beating her, becomes sexually violent and even gives her to other men to control her; he also uses her body to exert power on her. Firdaus abandons her body, resistant to feeling anything, even pain (El Saadawi, 1983: 53). Although she adopts a passive role, she is resistant when she feels oppressed.

When Firdaus steps into the world of prostitution, she refrains from sharing elaborate details about every man with whom she has been. Yet, some figures are noteworthy and make it into the narrative, indicating their particular impact or relevance in her life's story. There is a policeman who threatens to arrest her (because she is a prostitute) if she refuses to sleep with him. He promises to give her money for that but then he does not (El Saadawi, 1983: 67). This experience teaches her that she can exert power with money and through her body which leads her to become a prostitute. She changes from a woman who used to say "yes" to men to satisfy them out of fear to one who starts saying "no" which is the most evident, direct and immediate form of resistance.

Di'aa, a journalist, becomes a significant figure in Firdaus' life. His entrance into her life leads her to an office job, steering her away from prostitution as it appears he influences her to envision a life that diverges from her past in the sex trade (El Saadawi, 1983: 79). However, Di'aa called her disrespectful when he was turned down by Firdaus. Even when she has a so-called decent job, she is treated the same way by men who want to have control over women's bodies using their power as their boss; it is only by resistance that this power can be defeated. As an example of this, she confronts an official who offers her a lift and says:

you're a poor, miserable employee, unworthy of esteem, running after a bus to catch it. I'll take you in my car because your female body has aroused me. It is an honor for you to be desired by a respected official like myself. And who knows, maybe someday in the future, I can help you to get a rise before the others. (El Saadawi, 1983: 81).

She replies:

The price of my body is much higher than the price that can be paid for with a pay raise. (El Saadawi, 1983: 81).

She has learned well how to enjoy her power by rejecting men, by being resistant to their promises. She exerts power on them not only by rejecting them but also through her resistant discourse.

Ibrahim, her colleague, is another man who enters her life and abuses her physically and sexually, pretending to love her. The presence of Ibrahim as the chairman of voluntary works causes her to work long hours. He sleeps with her in the name of love. Through this relationship, she feels broken and confesses: "As a prostitute, I was not my real self, was not off guard, but in a love relation I was my true self, with no weapons or defiance." (El Saadawi, 1983: 93). She admits how she was unconsciously subject to the power of what she assumed to be love. So, knowing the reality and truth, she concludes that "... a successful prostitute was better than a misled saint" (El Saadawi, 1983: 94). Her first description of her awareness after this incident is

the feeling of being rejected by people and at the same time being able to reject them. ... She is free to do what she wants and free not to do it. (El Saadawi, 1983: 95).

She declares that she has been responsible for her own predicaments and decides to free herself from all kinds of relationships:

she experiences the rare pleasure of having no ties with anyone, of having broken with everything, of having cut all relations with the world around her, of being completely independent and living her independence completely, of enjoying freedom from any subjection to a man, to marriage, or to love; of being divorced from all limitations whether rooted in rules and laws in time or the universe. ... She no longer hopes for anything or desires anything. She no longer fears anything, for everything that can hurt her, she has already undergone. (El Saadawi, 1983: 95).

The possibility of refusal and saying "no" allows her to put men in a powerless situation. As she says: "A man cannot stand being rejected by a woman, because deep down inside he feels a rejection of himself" (El Saadawi, 1983: 97). She especially uses this tactic in relation to the men who believe they possess power due to their rank and status in society. No matter how much they try and how many methods they resort to, she refuses them. Even if they try to get her in trouble, she is powerful enough (through her relations) to protect herself (El Saadawi, 1983: 99). Her most rebellious act of resistance is when she refuses men from the government; no matter how much they try to achieve her, she rejects them. She says "no" not only to "them" but to the patriarchal society and its laws, to her country that she thinks "has not given her anything but also has taken away anything she had, including honor and dignity" (El Saadawi, 1983: 98).

Then, there is the example of Marzouk, a pimp who suggests protecting her from the police and other pimps in exchange for sharing her earnings (El Saadawi, 1983: 100). Firdaus refuses him and says she can protect herself while the pimp says, "There isn't a woman on earth who can protect herself." (El Saadawi, 1983: 100). Traditionally, power was equal to the domination of women by men using disciplinary control over women and their bodies under the pretext of protection. This resulted in the inability of women to exercise power, a view challenged by women and which changed power relations (Gordon, 2018: 33).

She even refuses his threats and goes to the police but only then to understand he has better connections than her and even the fact that legal proceedings would punish her and not the man (El Saadawi, 1983: 101). He finally manages to take a large part of her salary, have sex with her and even beat her up (El Saadawi, 1983: 102). She goes on for a while resorting to her passivity which she considers as a kind of resistance (El Saadawi, 1983: 102). However, she is not one who tolerates domination and she always tries to find a way to change her position. She cannot see her freedom endangered; therefore, she decides to stop relations with him and if she cannot make him leave, she leaves herself (El Saadawi, 1983: 102). The conversation they have before Firdaus' departure is of importance here since it summarizes the viewpoint of a typical man in a patriarchal society and a rebellious woman who does not want to give in:

'I don't want to be anybody's slave.'

'And who says there is anyone who is not someone else's slave? There are only two categories of people, Firdaus, masters and slaves.'

'In that case, I want to be one of the masters and not one of the slaves.'

'How can you be one of the masters? A woman on her own cannot be a master, let alone a woman who's a prostitute. Can't you see you're asking for the impossible?'

'The word impossible does not exist for me.' (El Saadawi, 1983: 103)

From this discussion, it can be inferred that Firdaus is acutely aware of the social dynamics of power and the way they often divide people into those with authority and those without. Despite recognizing the traditional binary structure that renders individuals powerless in a patriarchal society, Firdaus rejects the notion that her gender dictates an inevitable submission to domination. She believes that her gender cannot limit her; she resists accepting what is expected from her; she is fearless and ready to prove her power. Marzouk tells her that only a man can be in control and powerful and

that is why this time, when she is faced with violence, she does not try to resort to silence but tries to be loud, defensive and aggressive, just like a man:

I raised my hand even higher than he had done and brought it down violently on his face ... his hand started to reach for the knife he carried in his pocket, but my hand was quicker than his. I raised the knife and buried it deep in his neck and then thrust it deep into his chest, pulled it out of his chest, and plunged it deep into his belly. I stuck the knife into almost every part of his body. (El Saadawi, 1983: 104).

What happens that makes her change her strategy? She poses this question and answers it:

"Why was it that I had never stabbed a man before?" The answer is "fear", "the fear that was within me all the time, until the fleeting moment when I read fear in his eyes." (El Saadawi, 1983: 104).

It is the fear of slaves that falsely portrays the master as powerful and it is only the master who knows he is not the owner of the power. Power and fear are inextricably linked. Traditionally, men were considered as God-like figures and fear of them by women, like fear of God, was part and parcel of patriarchal traditions. Firdaus has struggled against this fear all her life and when this fear is gone, she finds her power back:

My body was as light as a feather, as though its weight had been nothing more than the accumulation of fears over the years. (El Saadawi, 1983: 105).

An Arab prince is the only man she sleeps with several hours after killing Marzouk. At first, she refuses him but then accepts him at a high price. She refuses him to give him the feeling of rejection; she accepts it for the money, the money that reminds her of all the men in her life and by tearing the money to pieces, she destroys them all (El Saadawi, 1983: 107). In this short relationship, she tries to challenge the stereotypes of gendered qualities; she becomes the one who gets aggressive, slaps, causes fear and puts the man in a miserable situation.

I am the only woman who had torn the mask away and exposed the face of their ugly reality. They condemned me to death not because I had killed a man but because they were afraid to let me live. They know that

as long as I am alive, they will not be safe, that I shall kill them. My life means their death. My death means their life. (El Saadawi, 1983: 110).

As Diamond and Quinby state, both Foucault and feminism consider the body as the source of power and focus on the local and intimate operations of power (qtd. in Mills, 2003: 29). The pimp clarifies this fact by saying, "My capital is women's body." (El Saadawi, 1983: 101). Firdaus, aware of this situation, puts it this way: "I was nothing but a body machine working day and night so that many men belonging to different professions could become immensely rich at my expense." (El Saadawi, 1983: 103). She believes whether a woman is a wife, an employee or in any role, she is forced to sell her body to benefit men:

men were in control of both our worlds ... men forced women to sell their bodies at a price, and the lowest-paid body was that of a wife. 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, 1983: 99).

We can discover different forms of power in all the above-mentioned relationships between individuals in what Foucault calls the "polymorphous techniques of power" (Foucault, 1978: 11). Struggles and conflicts, confrontation and instability exist at the heart of Firdaus' relations with men. Men mostly resort to violence, either physically or verbally, to exert power on Firdaus. Firdaus tends to resist in different ways. Men use their money to gain access to her body and she uses her body to gain their money. They use the law to subdue her and she uses the same law to free herself. They are both involved in a continuous circular network of power relations, finding their way as it best fits their condition and goals.

Firdaus in Relation with Other Women

While it is tempting to ascribe the entirety of injustices, disparities and abuses endured by women to male individuals and the overarching patriarchal framework, such a generalization is reductive. In reality, not all men perpetuate oppression against women and, similarly, not all women exhibit allegiance to female solidarity. Women are oppressed by each other on many occasions but they usually either deny it or attribute it to men's power. When we base our argument on Foucault's concept of power as present in any relation, we

are not concerned with genders only. Classification enables us to make a comparison and to highlight issues like women's power which has largely been ignored in previous research. Power relations are not limited to certain groups; every single individual is capable of exerting power on others. The following examples show power relations in woman-woman relationships.

The first and foremost encounter of Firdaus with power is in her relationship with her mother. When she is only a child, she asks her mother how she had given birth to her without a father (El Saadawi, 1983: 12). Her mother first beats her and then brings a woman to cut flesh from between her thighs. This physical punishment along with circumcision and deprivation of erotic pleasure never leaves her and causes her to always look for sexual pleasure in her later relations with men. Typical mothers turn daughters into someone like themselves, someone who obeys the laws and traditions of the patriarchal society, written by men, in favor of men, under the pretext of bringing up a true woman, acceptable by the society. She is under pressure by being trained to be a virtuous woman who is expected to work hard at home as a daughter or wife, serving men who represent God.

The second one is her uncle's wife, the daughter of her uncle's teacher in al-Azhar. The woman comes from an upper-class family which is the reason her uncle treats her with respect, not out of love, but out of fear. This woman shows up in the story as a powerful character who exerts power not only on Firdaus but also on her husband. Looking at the relationship of this couple, no master-slave relationship can be found like the one she had witnessed in her parents' relationship. This woman, whom Firdaus describes as "cruel", forces her to do chores, beats her and has her uncle send her to boarding school (El Saadawi, 1983: 23). She tries to get rid of her by wedding her to her old uncle who will pay a good amount of money (dowry) for her (El Saadawi, 1983: 38). Firdaus decides to run away, and she does, but then returns the moment she feels the threat of strangers (El Saadawi, 1983: 43–4).

Next is Sharifa, a successful prostitute who describes herself as hard, cruel and with a deadly bite like a snake (El Saadawi, 1983: 57). Sharifa is the first woman who evokes power in Firdaus, who makes her conscious, who reminds her of her worth and value. She teaches her how to be hard, harder than life, how to be like a snake and have a sting and not to underestimate herself (El Saadawi, 1983: 57–8). However, all these favors come with an expectation and Firdaus must pay the price. Sharifa sends men to her and makes money out of her and, in exchange, provides her with a luxurious and comfortable life and advises her not to seek feelings that will bring her nothing but pain (El Saadawi, 1983: 60). She escapes from Sharifa's house, agitated by a man who

tells her that she is fooling her to make money out of her (El Saadawi, 1983: 65). She has always looked for freedom and the moment she finds her freedom endangered, whether by a man or a woman, she does not hesitate to act.

Even in these relationships, all three women who exert power on Firdaus, target her body, indirectly and not immediately. Whether through violence or coercion, the result is the same. However, Firdaus seems to be less resistant toward women and she refuses to put them in the same group as the men who tried to use her. She never finds women competing with her for power, so she refrains from attacking them. She believes that it is men who want to be masters and treat women as slaves.

Although the role of women in Firdaus' life and their power in the story has been underestimated by critics, women have a critical role in shaping Firdaus' identity and future. They have used her body and scarred her soul indirectly. Her mother deprives Firdaus of her sexual pleasure which affects her for the rest of her life. Her uncle's wife forces her into marriage instead of supporting her as her only relative even when she suffers from violence by her husband. And Sharifa, who is aware of the dangers that may threaten her as a prostitute, takes her into the profession just to make money. Nonetheless, Firdaus' power is more evident in her relationship with men rather than women.

Conclusion

Observing Firdaus' transformation throughout the narrative complicates any straightforward categorization of her as a mere victim. Initially portrayed as a naïve, amiable and hopeful young woman, she evolves into a figure characterized by complexity, resilience and pragmatic realism. This metamorphosis underscores the multidimensionality of her character's journey and challenges reductionist interpretations of her experiences. She learns how her body can be a source of power both for others who use it to oppress her and for herself to use it to exert power on others.

In her relationships with men and women, she takes an active role in exerting power. Wherever she has the chance to complain, she complains; whenever she finds a way to escape, she runs away and, finally, when she finds the opportunity to free herself from fear, she does not hesitate to act even if her action is murdering someone. She refuses all the traditional stereotypes related to the relation of men and women. Firdaus creates her own power; she goes through changes and changes others. She shows us that *powerful* is not necessarily the opposite of *powerless* but it is the situation of people and their position in power relations that determine their status.

Hence, power as domination is not a fixed concept. Analyzing the interpersonal dynamics in the story, one notes that dividing men and women into homogeneous groups with stereotyped traits is an oversimplification. Individuals display varied characteristics and behaviors that transcend gender, highlighting the complexity of human interactions and the inadequacy of binary gender classifications.

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