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UNVEILING WOMEN'S STRUGGLES IN NAWAL EL SAADAWİ'S *WOMAN AT POINT ZERO* FROM A POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract
Nawal El Saadawi (1931-2021) was an Egyptian author, public health physician, psychiatrist, and prominent feminist activist. In several of her works, including *Woman at Point Zero* (1975), she endeavoured to uncover the hidden side of the truth concerning 'double-colonized' women in third-world countries. In the novel that is the subject matter of this article, Saadawi remarks on the patriarchy of religious fundamentalism and its adverse impacts on Arab Muslim women contextualised within Egypt's socio-political environment. The work proves to be the voice of oppressed women who were compelled to live under the circumstances inherent in problematic and traumatic social traditions that deny women's autonomy, such as circumcision through the paradigm of knowledge/power marginalising discourses on political, economic, cultural, and religious matters as the legacy of the post-colonial era. It was through Firdaus, the rebellious heroine of the novel, who stood against her predestined life story fraught with violence that is shaped and imposed by the state administration as an extension of social and traditional practices circumscribed her willingness to effectuate the knowledge of herself, her essence, and her emancipation at the cost of her life. Saadawi illuminated her heroine as a unique and courageous figure in an Arab country. In this article, Firdaus' struggle for women's prescribed roles in politics, economics, culture, society, and nationalism in a post-colonial country within the scope of religious fundamentalism will be analysed using Orientalism as the matrix of these problematic norms for the alienation of women.
Keywords: Nawal El Saadawi, Firdaus, post-colonialism, religious fundamentalism, women's socio-political position

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Postkolonyal Perspektiften Nevâl es-Sa'dâvî'nin *Woman at Point Zero* (Sıfır Noktasındaki Kadın) Adlı Romanında Kadın Mücadelesinin Ortaya Çıkarılması

Öz

Nevâl es-Sa'dâvî (1931-2021) Mısırlı bir yazar, halk sağlığı doktoru, psikiyatrist, önde gelen feminist aktivisttir. Sıfır Noktasındaki Kadın (1975) da dâhil olmak üzere birçok eserinde, ikinci dünya ülkelerindeki 'çifte sömürgeleştirilmiş' kadınlarla ilgili gerçeğin diğer gizli yüzünü ortaya çıkarmaya çalışmıştır. Bu makalenin de inceleme konusu olan romanında Sa'dâvî, Mısır'daki sosyo-politik ortam ışığında köktendinciliğin ataerkilliğine ve bunun Arap Müslüman kadınları üzerindeki yıkıcı etkilerine değinmektedir. Eser, kendi toplumları içinde siyasi, ekonomik, kültürel ve dini alanlarda ve post-kolonyal dönemin mirası olarak ötekileştirici ve indirgemeci söylemlere dayanan bilgi ve güç paradigmasının bir örnek pratiği olan kadın sünneti gibi kadınların özerkliğini reddeden problematik ve travmatik toplumsal geleneklere içkin koşullar altında yaşamak zorunda bırakılan kadınların sesi olduğunu göstermektedir. Kitabın asi kahramanı Firdevs, kendini, kendi hakikatini ve hürriyetini hayatı pahasına gerçekleştirme arzusunu sınırlayan, toplum ve geleneksel pratiklerin bir uzantısı olarak devlet yönetimi tarafından da desteklenmiş olan biçimlendirilmiş ve dayatılmış şiddet dolu kaderine karşı durmaktadır. Sa'dâvî, başkarakterini ise bir Arap ülkesinde eşsiz ve cesur bir vaka olarak değerlendirmektedir. Bu makalede, Firdevs'in sömürge sonrası dönemde, kendi ülkesindeki sömürgeci tahakküm sonrası baş gösteren şovenist bir yönetim biçimi olarak köktendincilik bağlamında kadınların politika, ekonomi, kültür, toplum ve milliyetçilik kavramları altında kendilerine biçilen rollere karşı verdiği mücadele, bu sorunsallaştırılmış normların yabancılaştırma matrisi olan Şarkiyatçılık çerçevesinde analiz edilecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Nevâl es-Sa'dâvî, Firdevs, sömürgecilik sonrası, köktendincilik, kadınların sosyo-politik durumu

INTRODUCTION

A distinguished advocate for women's rights and prominent writer, Nawal El Saadawi was educated at Cairo University (1955) as a medical doctor. She, then attended Columbia University in New York (1966) and received a master's degree in public health. Lastly, she pursued her studies at Ayn Shams University in Cairo and she conducted psychiatric research on neurotic women in 1972 and 1974, working with prisoners at Qanatir women's jail. She also worked as a physician at Cairo University and in the Egyptian Ministry of Health from 1955 to 1965. In 1966, she was appointed director-general of the department responsible for health education. Besides, her publication Health Magazine was founded in 1968 but subsequently closed by Egyptian authorities several years later. Later on, in 1972, she was expelled from her professional position in the Ministry of Health due to the publication of her controversial book *Women and Sex* (1969) which was condemned by religious establishments and political leaders in Egypt.

According to some critics, El Saadawi was considered as Simone de Beauvoir of the Arab world and Egypt's most radical woman an exponent of human rights and a prominent voice in the struggle for gender equality and women's liberation. Jane Hiddleston, a professor of literature in French at the University of Oxford, comments on her position on Arab feminism as follows; 'El Saadawi calls for a necessary movement from the local to the global and though she alludes to the importance of maintaining a sense of feminine diversity, she stresses the need for a unity created over and above particular differences' (Hiddleston, 2010, p. 185). Accordingly, it is evident from her

writings and professional career that she has devoted a great deal of time and energy to promoting women's social, political, and sexual rights, highlighting gender discrimination and the oppressions/restrictions of women in every position within their societies and state formations, often in conjunction with religious convictions throughout history. This commitment to women's empowerment has made her an essential figure in the development of contemporary feminism, from Egypt to the world.

In this article, Saadawi's related work will be analysed through the lenses of postcolonial and Orientalist theory, particularly in relation to how her writing challenges the power dynamics between East and West. In this context and within the orientalist and postcolonial frameworks, this article attempts to investigate how Saadawi's work contests the power dynamics between East and West, what alternative perspectives it offers on the representation of Arab women and new insights it provides regarding Arab women in literature. Saadawi's feminist logic does not only seek to reveal the male dominance in her culture but also defies the Western images of Middle Eastern women, presenting their issues, challenges and power in a different light.

1. AN INTRODUCTION TO EL SAADAWI'S POSTCOLONIAL PERCEPTIONS

Most of her works embody her psychiatric and feminist identities, and they are largely concerned with the psychosis of women, prostitution, and, more specifically, female genital mutilation, also known as clitoridectomy. A major objective of her works is to raise awareness regarding the effects of circumcision, the violation of women's rights, freedom of choice, and the overall impact of patriarchy on women's agency and well-being. El Saadawi evaluates the religious fundamentalism founded in the name of God as a strong reaction to protect religious, cultural, and identity oneness and purity against Western colonialism in the same category as neocolonialism that invades the women's body and position within the power relations. The religious fundamentalist agenda that is seen in most of the third world/Muslim countries executes the identical colonial/neocolonial profits as exploitations of capitalist, ecclesiastic, and patriotic systems as well as 'trading in women's bodies for patriarchal sexual gratification' (Newson-Horst (Ed.), 2010, p. 120-121). The women's bodies perform as a naked, vulnerable, and acquirable field to hold down through the absolute masculine power as an imitation of colonial and imperial control. The oppressed women within the nationalist struggle for liberation against Western domination/colonialisation appeared as invisible subalterns who must be kept under perpetual surveillance due to their uncontrolled threat of procreation for the religious nation's integrity and dignity.

El Saadawi stresses the truth that women have been subjected to heavy sanctions in the political Islamic system, where they are seen solely as sexual objects and their sexuality is considered sinful and impure. Accordingly, she dwells on one of the most detrimental practices, female genital mutilation (FGM). In particular, she stresses its psychological consequences such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. As a traditional ritual for women in her country, she wrote extensively on the topic in her book, *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1977) documenting her personal experience of mutilation as she was forced to undergo this agonising procedure at the age of six. El

Saadawi's work was met with both approval and criticism, but it had a lasting impact on the feminist movement in Arab nations.

Furthermore, more extensively, through her subject matter choices in her novels, non-fiction, and short stories that commonly concentrate on women's positions and conditions in Arab countries, she faced punitive criticism and treatment as her writings challenged the exposed circumstances in the existing system, in general, the traditional moral and social roles of women and power dynamics between men and women in Islamic societies. Her works defied the administration created by patriarchal structures promoting critical thinking and questioning, threatening those who held power and authority. This ultimately led to her imprisonment in 1981 on account of her outstanding opinions and arguments.

It was the same jail where she was imprisoned and met Firdaus in 1974, the main character of one of her most prominent works and the focus of this analysis, *Woman at Point Zero* (written in 1975 and published in 1977), which was another of her works banned in Egypt by political and religious leaders. Conjoining her public health degree and psychiatric research, interested in sentenced women's neurosis, she gains access to Qanatir Prison and learns about Firdaus' case, murdering Marzouk, a pimp, with the assistance of the prison doctor, who believed that someone as gentle as Firdaus could not be a murderer but rather an innocent victim. Firdaus refuses to see a doctor but eventually agrees to meet with Nawal, unable to resist her persistence. Firdaus shares her life story on the day before her execution in 1974. In the book's preface, Nawal remarked that Firdaus' life was a 'terrible yet wonderful story' and that she was a 'unique' individual among the women who refused to accept the life assigned to them. She expresses no fear of death within a complete indifference to her plight and surrounding complexion at the end of her lifetime (El Saadawi, 1983).

2. FIRDAUS AS A MUSLIM FEMINIST [1] FEMALE IDENTITY

The narration starts with the introduction of Firdaus' world with emphasis on the fact that *Woman at Point Zero* provides a realistic portrayal of a real woman right from the beginning of the book. She is depicted as a woman struggling to survive in a male-dominated society, where she has zero freedom to act, decide, and express her feelings and desires. It is the story of her struggle and suffering, as she faces the daily oppressions and confinements that result from her gender and lower social class within her socio-cultural environment. Firdaus' emblematic experience can be regarded as the intersection between patriarchy and colonial legacy since her experience is not only shaped by her gender but also by the power dynamics shaped by the colonial history of Egypt. As noted

[1] The statement 'Muslim feminist' acts as a substitution for Islamic feminist, which they occasionally use reciprocally in literature. Firdaus represents the pursuit of equal opportunities for both men and women in both private and public spheres while individualizing women within the Islamic culture, as Islamic feminism aims to accomplish in Muslim territories in the broadest term.

by postcolonial theorists, the structures of domination marginalise people and doubly oppress the marginalised that is by local patriarchal customs and the lingering effects of colonial rule (Said, 1977).

Through Firdaus's difficult confrontations with mistreatment and humiliation in Egyptian civilization, readers gain a vivid and intimate perspective on the life of a woman living in a patriarchal society that bears the remnants of past colonial subjugation. Firdaus' story provides a distinctive perspective on the challenge women face in traditional roles based on the dominant religious faith. As the overwhelming majority of women in the male-dominated society of Egypt, she suffers from deprivation of women's rights. This includes being subjected to physical, psychological, sexual, and domestic violence in all its forms, genital mutilation, forced marriage, lack of educational opportunity, and economic marginalization within the patriarchal hierarchy in the realm of politics, shaped by Islamic law and ethnic culture in her community. In this system, women, like Firdaus, are exposed to created gender and social identities from birth- from a very zero point- which fixates their positions in national culture and limits the opportunities for self-growth and advancement. This reinforces the power imbalance between men and women, perpetuating a cycle of discrimination, domination, and eventually persecution.

This inferior position of women in third-world countries like Egypt is closely associated with the detrimental effects of the previous colonial powers in de-colonizing and non-European nations. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the Indian literary feminist critic, explores this issue in her article *Foucault and Najibullah* (1998). Similar to Edward Said's Orientalism (1978), the relationship between Occident (us/European) and Orientals (other/non-European) is '[t]he core of [his] argument [that] resides in the link between knowledge and power' in Foucauldian terms. Such concepts are exemplified by 'Prime Minister Arthur Balfour's defence of Britain's occupation of Egypt in 1910' who stated, 'We know the civilization of Egypt better than we know any other country'. This quote is mentioned in the review article Orientalism (1999) by Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia (cited in Said, 1978, p. 32). It illustrates the interconnection between knowledge (constructed by imperial colonizers for *the other*) and power (held by Europeans) in shaping the perception of the East, in this particular case of Egypt. The possession of such knowledge is a form of domination and authority over the subject, as it defines the Oriental reality by virtue of the West. In other and more theoretical words, it is stated that '[t]o have such knowledge of such a thing [[as Egypt]] is to dominate it, to have authority over it…since we know it and it exists, in a sense, as we know it' (p. 32).

In the asymmetrical power dynamic between the Occident and the Orient, the former assumes a dominant and superior role, while the other is subjected to colonization and dehumanization. They are silenced and portrayed as backward with their knowledge violated in what is perceived as an 'exotic' reality. This hegemonic narrative, rooted in prejudice and racism, persists to this day. Also, the geographical segregation reflects the binary nature of Orientalism, wherein women are 'double colonized' within authoritarian

governmental systems and through the social and religious customs of decolonized third-world countries, as they attempt to emulate Europe's colonial power (Spivak, 1988). Spivak cites Melanie Klein, an Austrian-British author and psychoanalyst, who suggests that 'when a group of men is oppressed by another group, against whom it can do nothing, Envy makes it turn against women, especially the imago of the Mother' (p. 222). Consequently, women become the main targets of frustrations and insecurities of the oppressed groups within the new foundational Islamic state as a reaction to the overwhelming colonial control for themselves as subalterns/Others. Parenthically, Arabian women serve as scapegoats for men's lack of control in the Western colonial power structure, resulting in a 'patriarchal backlash' where men, in their own geography, in attempt to execute belittled, so envious and tyrannize dominance over women as double subalternized group. In this way, the man who was an object of knowledge within Foucauldian terms seeks to shape and control the woman as another object of knowledge by preserving the same power structure inherited from past colonial suppression in the postcolonial/neocolonial period. Here, the legacy of Said is noteworthy to underline with its critical role in the portrayal of Eastern societies as despotic and regressive. In this context, the colonised male adopts the Orientalist framework to reassert control, reinforcing both gender and cultural hierarchies. In further analysis in the context of de-colonizing nations, men are seen as the ones in control of the discourse of authority, producing knowledge, while women are expected to conform to it.

The most prominent theme of the power relations between genders in the work is seen through extensive female violence. As the victim of men's destructive dominance and animalistic desires for women, from her early childhood in the 1970s, Firdaus endures sorrowful and traumatic circumstances in the oppressive paternalist system of her society, as the greater part of Egyptian women. In her family house, she witnesses her mother being beaten by her father, and she also takes her share as the next victim of his anger and violence as a daughter rather than her brothers. Later, as a child discovering her own sexuality with curiosity, she is immediately deprived of any sexual pleasure and cut off from her genital organ (FGM) without her consent to control any desirous sexual urges namely to protect or control her chastity against men consistent with Islamic national and cultural norms. So, she loses the sensation of the game 'bride and bridegroom' played with her childhood friend Mohammadain while her uncle abuses her underlining the sensational loss repeatedly in the novel and describing her experience; 'It was as if I could no longer recall the exact spot from which it used to arise, or as though a part of me, of my being, was gone and would never return' (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 13). On account of this tormenting and immense emotional and psychological stressful practice on Firdaus, intercourse becomes purely a single-sided pleasure devoted only to men, and the rise of women, even in sexual relations metaphorically, is considered unacceptable and controlled as a form of oppression within the context of power relations that keeps women in subservient positions while denying their right to have any physical autonomy.

Firdaus, after losing her family, stays at his uncle's house where she faces continues sexual abuse. Once Firdaus receives her secondary school certificate, her uncle's spouse

tries to persuade him to arrange her marriage to Sheikh Mahmoud, a 'virtuous man' who wishes for an obedient wife asserting her reason as; 'It is risky for her to continue without a husband' (p. 37). Thereon, although Firdaus considers escaping from her uncle's house, she is terrified by the abuseful eyes on the streets and so consents to the marriage at an early age. Her uncle sold her to Mahmoud, a stingy old man of sixty with a swelling chin, who stays at home all day watching, refraining, and abusing Firdaus physically, sexually, and emotionally. Her first attempt to flee from her husband's cruelty and nestle into her uncle declines with a retort that all husbands beat their wives and that '[i]t was precisely men well versed in their religion who beat their wives. The precepts of religion permitted such punishment. A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience' (p. 46-47). As the statement represents, religion is used to control and manipulate women by paternalistic domination using distorted religious teachings to legitimize their actions and justify their oppressive behavior and violence over women. From a postcolonial perspective, Firdaus' experiences highlight how gendered oppression in postcolonial societies is often a continuation of the power structures imposed by colonialism, where control over women's bodies is maintained through both religious and cultural practices. This is a manifestation of what Gayatri Spivak describes as the 'double subalternization' of women, who are oppressed not only by patriarchy but also by the colonial legacy that continues to define gender and social relations in postcolonial nations. Additionally, Firdaus' entrapment within marriage can be analysed through the lens of Orientalism, as the Western colonial view often stereotyped Eastern societies as inherently oppressive towards women, casting them as victims of their own cultural and religious systems. This Orientalist gaze, critiqued by Edward Said, shapes not only Western perceptions of the East but also internalised systems of control that men use to validate their dominance over women.

After a while, Fridaus, disgusted with her husband and his deformed body, cannot stand his violent treatment, and starvation runs out of home wandering through Egypt's streets, with swollen eyes, bloody ears, and bruises on her face. Thereafter resting in a coffee shop and briefly conversing with Bayoumi, the owner, she accepts his invitation to stay with him. However, Firdaus shares with him that over several months, she has wanted to find a job and live independently. As a response, Bayoumi violently punishes her outcrying 'you streetwalker, you low woman!' (p. 66). He incarcerates her during the day and allows his friends to abuse, beat, insult, and rape Firdaus. In the end, with the help of a neighbour woman, Firdaus ultimately escapes from the house and her marriage which symbolizes an impediment and entrapment ahead for her freedom.

The provided examples show that power dynamics are used to subjugate women by reducing their power and manipulating their rights in every sphere of life, thus promoting their invisibility in public and capitulatory in marriage. Firdaus' experiences with men in her environment are depreciating and appalling which further implements the patriarchal society. In this society, women are expected to obey and succumb to male domination in every way based on the Islamic religion, which is inseparable from the culture. Consequently, women are not seen as independent individuals with the right to

choose and speak for themselves. Instead, they are treated as objects to be owned and used for the male carnal desires' satisfaction creating the notion of sameness and replaceability of women to one another as a sexual object. Firdaus' understanding of power is deeply rooted in the oppressive social system she lives in. In this system, men are considered the superior sex, while women are perceived as weak, unwise, and unworthy of rank who have been defamed from honour. This constructed power and knowledge correlation confines women's agency and prevents them from achieving their full potential self-efficiency in a reassured world of double standards.

So, El Saadawi, in the partial disguise of Firdaus in the novel, presents her constructed judgments on the male potency of Egyptian rulers that oppress/molest women and their reflection on society orienting it with suffusive masculinity (Idris et al., 2018, p. 206). Furthermore, she sets an argument based on the patriarchal society's receipt of power from the national culture by exposing the ultimate paradox of colonial mimicry of political and religious powers. Mahmut Mutman (2008) explains this paradox as follows 'neither pure emergence nor pure imitation is possible' and mimicry 'will always have to be thought as the appropriation of a model' in his article *The Nation-Form* (p. 9). He also points out that, as a result of mimicry, there is an emanation of 'growing antagonism between organicist or authoritarian nationalism and liberal globalism' in the decolonizing nations. Hence, nations like Egypt attempt to regain independence and distinguish themselves from their colonial past through 'national liberation ['as an act of culture'] in opposition to imperialist domination, while reproducing the same European system of politics and economy as the subject of mimesis for development and progress (Mutman, 2009, p. 3-4). Even though they aim to establish a distinct identity through the liberation struggle, which is for 'the preservation and survival of the cultural values of the people and for the harmonization [of] these values within a national framework', they still rely on the European model as a blueprint (p. 8).

Amidst the antagonism and the emergence of fundamentalist movements, particularly the wave of religious (Islamic) extremism in 1970s Egypt, a review by Chia-Ling She (2020), from the University of Leicester, highlights Egyptian '[w]omen's position in society has been caught between modernists and traditionalists in the process of creating a new social order for the new [decolonizing] nation' (p. 195). In the novel, we are observing the phenomenon of colonial mimicry of civilized Europe, particularly in its treatment of women as an otherised and silenced gender within Egyptian cultural society. This undermines the promised freedom and progress of modern times illustrating the inherent costs and failures of this system. Consequently, due to the ongoing struggle between nationalism and liberalism, the excessive emulation of former colonial powers, especially in the context of modernizing women through the imitation of Europe, is seen as a violation or erosion of their ethnic identity and culture within their own nation (Mutman, 2008, p. 12).

In the article *Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation* (1998), Deniz Kandiyoti explores the cultural norms that underpin the control of women on their social

and political positions in post-colonial societies, considering their national identities. According to her claims, women, in addition to their moulded traditional gender roles, are further constrained by their integration into nationalist state projects which are seen as the institution of reinforcing male gender identity in the masculine domain. In a post-colonial and, through the new nation formation, allegedly modernized civil society 'is constituted through the 'original' separation and opposition between the modern, public-civil world and the modern, private or conjugal familial sphere' (Pateman, 1988 cited in Kandiyoti, 1998, p. 2). This division is indicated as the men in control not only within the 'private' sphere but also in the 'public' realm as the main forms of a paternalistic society by drawing from British sociologist Sylvia Walby's work *Theorizing Patriarchy* (1990). The refusal of women's integration into the public sphere is promoted by the tension between religious and civil laws, with the former often limiting women's rights, while governments in decolonizing nations strive to protect these norms and adjust their politics accordingly. Additionally, by drawing our attention to the fluidity between the private and public patriarchal spheres, Kandiyoti references Nira Yuval-Davis, an Israeli sociologist, from her work *Women, Citizenship and Difference* (1997), which asserts that patriarchal political state apparatuses are subordinated to cultural and familial codes (p. 2-3). In this context, the private hierarchical system describes the exclusion of women from social life, while the public patriarchal system represses and confines the female gender within the sphere of the state, primarily based on their labour.

Kandiyoti continues her arguments by stating that in third-world countries, despite efforts to cultivate and raise awareness about the effects of modernism, there have been ongoing public and private campaigns to control women's bodies (e.g. fertility control) and consciousness (e.g. lack of education). To resist modernity in this regard, women are often subjected to strict customary rules imposed by the regime as part of social legislation rooted in fundamentalism, which is adopted as a national identity. Ironically, contrary to the approval of technological and industrial advancement implemented by imperial/colonial powers, often endorsed by representatives of traditional ideologies, the tension between modernists and organicists is more evident at the nationalist level when it comes to gendered citizenship. This tension, as referred to in Klein's concept of 'envy' mentioned alongside Spivak, is a consequence of power relations stemming from the knowledge of gender inequality inherited from the colonial period. Women were expected to be devoted wives and citizens, conforming to established gender roles and embodying what Iranian historian Afsaneh Najmabadi (1991) referred to as 'modern-yet-modest', in contrast to men who enjoyed self-dependence and liberty (p. 4).

The restrictions or discriminations against women, both private and public spheres, as a part of gendered politics, have led to them being uneducated, disesteemed, and viewed as backward by the ruling class. Additionally, the close association of women with the private domain reinforces the idea of the selfless mother and devoted wife confined to their homes and excluded from public policy. In this way, women often become the symbolic representations of ethnic, and religious differences or serve as symbolic markers of a nation's mainstreams, defined by their dresses (veils) and manners, as they

carry 'the burden of being 'mothers of the nation'', as suggested by Yuval-Davis and Anthias (1989). As an indication of the religious inclination, the tighter grip on women's roles and position appears as a legitimization for the protection of national/original values against possible colonial intrusion as women are seen as responsible for transmitting culture through their reproduction (p. 1-7). Conservative nationalists like Mustafa Kamil, argue that the liberation of women is viewed as unpatriotic development. 'Occidentalism' emerges as a social and cultural resistance mechanism against women's emancipation, legitimizing the subordination of women's rights based on nationalism and religious doctrines (p. 8-9).

Despite their central role in the reproduction of the nation, women are often marginalized and excluded from the domain of politics, employment, and education. This appears as a consequence of the way modernity is interpreted and the paradoxical position of colonial mimicry in third-world countries. So, on these grounds she exemplifies and defends, Kandiyoti (1998) proposes in the article that 'Feminism is not autonomous, but bound to the signifying network of the national context which produces it' (p. 5). As a result of this paradigm, any movement dedicated to modernizing or liberating women is concerned with alienation, potentially damaging the traditional identities connected to culture and religion. Those who transgress these communal norms and 'commit sins' by rebelling against their duty of being devoted wives or mothers become more regulated than ever to preserve traditions against foreign intrusion, metaphoric or not. They are relegated to second-class gender and citizenship status. These individuals are not only seen as outcasts by their community but their contraventions are often perceived as signs of disrespect for the community and its values. Consequently, they are subjected to severe punishment, including humiliation, physical violence, or execution.

It can be argued that one of the prominent examples of gendered politics and women's social or public detachment and alienation in Egypt is Firdaus' conflict in the context of economic marginalization. Coming from a poor and lower-class family, her farmer father refuses to give money to Firdaus just as her husband does later in the novel. She always eats her father's leftovers and sometimes goes without supper despite her arduous work in the fields and at home. When she wanted a piastre for candy for the first time from her father, she was hit by and instructed to 'clean under the animals and load the ass and take [it] to the fields' if she requested a piastre (El Saadawi, 2007, p. 69). From this occurrence, it is implied that women are expected to be only involved in domestic work as non-workers within gender construction, while men are typically responsible for providing financial power and authority. This stresses the inequitable gender dynamics in the family reinforcing the idea that women deprived of the world of labour are believed to be subservient daughters, wives, or mothers and take on roles of servitude and obedience without receiving the same opportunities and recognition as men in their social system that consists of master and slave dichotomy (Hegel, 1979).

Yet, in the novel, Sharifa Salal el Dine changes the course for Firdaus who feels deeply otherised in the world of men and overall un-belonging to her family, her house, and even to her own body, which is mutilated, raped, and beaten in perpetuity evoking her weak, passive, dishonourable, and worthless status. As a proudhearted prostitute, Sharifa supports Firdaus in recognizing her value or price and strength to regain authority over her body while changing Firdaus into her prostitute and earning money over her body. Upon learning from her customer, Fawzy, that she is being exploited, Firdaus resolves to become an independent prostitute to earn her living. Until she is deeply disturbed and disgraced when one of her clients asserts that she is not respectable, Firdaus expects to have control over her body and so men who desire her at length. Firdaus feels deeply humiliated and disappointed by her allusion that she had become the master of her life and that her earnings were a sign and measure of her independence and self-assurance. The client's words, however, reminded her that society still views her as someone lacking social standing and reputation. As she finds a 'respectable' position in a company, she attempts to conform to society. Despite the great expectation, within a short timeframe, she becomes extremely distressed by the engagement of her colleague, Ibrahim, whom she falls in love with, to an upper-class woman after using Firdaus for sexual intercourse. With such deep sorrow, she is driven into depression, devastation, and despair causing her to feel rejected and unworthy of anyone or any sphere created by men for women, especially those of a lower socio-economic class. In response to feeling dishonoured and villainised, Firdaus decides to quit and returns to prostitution, gaining a strong insight into patriarchal dominance over women.

Accordingly, being a prostitute allows her to take back control and decide over her life, future destiny, and self-worth as her choice of freedom and autonomy over her body, to accept or reject, with her high price money that could buy the honour, dignity, and respect she desires the most. Her refusal to consent to the president as her client, even if it means being sent to jail, demonstrates her commitment to personal emancipation. After enduring great mistreatment throughout her life and humiliation from each man in her life in private and public spheres, she comprehends that women are provided as victims of deception imposed by men, who then condemn and penalize women for being deceived and '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). Instead, she is a prostitute who is least deluded in escaping from the marriage, a system 'built on the most cruel suffering for women' as an agency asserting male control traditionally (p. 94). Subsequently, she considers herself more liberated and more expensive than other women for being in a better situation having financial freedom, and not being bound to societal expectations of living her life in the way she wants to without hope or desire. Through this mindset, Saadawi (2007) utters the most striking words in the novel;

> Men force women to sell their bodies at a price, and … the lowest-paid body is 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. (p. 99)

From Firdaus' perspective, it appears that women are forced to be in this position due to the unequal power dynamics between men and women. Firdaus concludes that in an Arabic society in Egypt, women are seen as being of low status and weak, treated as sex objects that can be raped, bred, and used solely for incubating the nation. Firdaus internalizes this singular role assigned to women as submissive mothers, who are physically and emotionally abused, and she leverages the approved women's role to her advantage by achieving private and financial independence through prostitution.

In the novel, Firdaus struggles to acquire her self-worth, respect, and social-political rights that were taken away before her existence owing to the traditional norms affixed to her gender. Despite the world of restrictions and predetermined norms that she was born into, she strives to gain sovereignty and self-sufficiency despite all sorts of physical, sexual, political, and social obstacles and oppression within the religious culture of the nation. By choosing to be a prostitute, she tries to gain economic independence, in the public sphere and so in private through their fluidity, as a respectable subject in the only possible position among the traditional gender roles, based on her belief, considering the socio-political conditions as a female coming from a lower-class status. It appears as a way to express her own will and challenge the social, political, and religious norms imposed by her culture, where sex is used to oppress women by exposure to FGM very early to set the sexual drive to zero. Firdaus' preference appears to be a form of self-empowerment through an ironical and paradoxical resistance against the patriarchal system that has dominated her from the very beginning, from the zero point/by birth.

Nevertheless, in the novel, when her self-made/chosen independence falls into danger because of Marzouk, a pimp who claims that '[a] woman on her own cannot be a master' and forcefully tries to take a share of her earning as trade by sexually abusing and beating her, Firdaus stabs him till death in order to gain her complete emancipation, metaphorically destroying the dichotomy between man (master) and woman (slave) and gaining her voice in this extent (p. 104). From a postcolonial perspective, Firdaus' deed represents his symbolic rejection of colonial and patriarchal dominance. Similar to how colonized people struggle against their oppressors, Firdaus' killing of Marzouk symbolises a revolt against those who have attempted to subjugate and take advantage of her. It is possible to interpret her violent declaration of autonomy as a protest against what Spivak refers to as the subaltern perspective, denying the oppressed the right to express themselves or claim agency.

After her murder, against the Arab prince who insists on having intercourse with her and refuses to believe her to be a prostitute but a princess, she rips down his banknotes expressing that she is priceless. Later, she denies being a prostitute, but rather, '[her] father, uncle, [her] husband, all of them, taught [her] to grow up as a prostitute' (p. 108). Then, by slapping the prince in the face, she confirms her power and proves that she killed

a man despite appearing to them as weak, 'gentle', and passive. Subsequently, she is taken to prison accompanied by an officer calling her a savage and untamed insurgent following the pattern of colonialism, its otherization, and positioning as inferior, to the zero point/nothingness. Conversely, Firdaus believes that for the reason of exposing the truth and ugly reality to their frightened faces, and being rather than a murderer but an exposer threatening the traditional gender roles, she is put in Qanatir prison with 'a room where the windows and the doors were always shut' (p. 124). Through the room's symbolic imagery, the representation may well be the embodiment of the closed doors on her of secondary school and Bayoumi's house and the vision of long walls that she sees after being rejected, disappointed, and betrayed by her teacher Iqbal and her colleague Ibrahim.

Moreover, Firdaus' cell can be interpreted with the metaphor of women's position in the male-controlled world. They cannot live freely but rather in prison throughout their lives, facing constant subjugation within the confines of predestination. Based on this argument, it is reasonable to suggest that the title 'point zero' represents the vicious circle of women's lives. Regardless of what they endure or accomplish, they will eventually be brought back to the starting point, trapped in a cycle of entrapment. Accordingly, in representing Arab women, it refers to Firdaus' struggle against poverty, violence, exploitation, and sexual assaults in Egypt. This struggle results in a dark, low point, due to her living conditions and positions. Additionally, 'the zero point' may also indicate that Firdaus has reached the end of her life journey and will be executed for her murder as the ultimate consequence of her acts of rebellion and transgression against the patriarchal law of religious fundamentalism in her county, leading to disillusionment.

In addition, the concept of "zero" can also be interpreted in a relatively positive manner, implying Firdaus attains autonomy and power by killing the pimp, slapping the prince or rejecting the sexual offer of the head of state and leading herself to the zero point, death, thus liberating herself from absolute subjugation through the primitive level of acts as ground zero (Gohar, 2016, p. 182). The interpretation is in keeping with that of the heroine in many Greek myths who kills herself to gain her freedom and independence. It is also akin to the feminist ideal of female empowerment through self-destruction, where a woman chooses to end her life to take control of her destiny. A revolutionary character under the voice of El Saadawi, through the act of murder which appears as a metaphor for empowering herself from her oppressors, Firdaus achieves 'triumph' in both life and death. As she states, '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 am free' (p. 110). She refuses to seek pardon by signing an appeal to the president to commute her execution to a life sentence, rejecting the rule of any man whose metaphors have become her reality. This refusal is, ultimately, directed at the patriarchal prison-like world and its system of discipline, punishment, or fear control in which she is trapped. In lieu of struggling to survive as barely human within the confines of the knowledge created for women in her national culture, she 'chooses' to die for her own truth with self-determination. So, the title, through her brave stance against unequal treatment in order

to break the cycle, can also signify that she is at 'point zero', the beginning of consciousness. In this manner, women's empowerment and enlightenment can be encouraged.

EVALUATION

As Nawal El Saadawi (1983) states, '*Firdaus* is the story of a woman driven by despair to the darkest of ends'. The tragedy of suffering from oppression and repression begins at a very early age with genital mutilation as a cultural practice, which haunts Firdaus throughout her life. She is trapped in a world where moral and social decay, and exploited cultural and religious norms, surround her existence. A similar phenomenon occurs when binary-natured colonial allegations adapted through nationalist and political contexts, which are disingenuous and fictitious in reality, are presented as facts about Arabian women who are double-colonized in the constitution of a new Islamic state. Unavoidably the emanation and mimicry of Oriental discourse in the formation of religious fundamentalism invade radically most of the Muslim women in the postcolonial, or in El Saadawi's term, neocolonial period. This perpetuation of colonizer mentality as a reaction to past colonial superpowers through politics, fundamental propaganda, and polarizing national consciousness results in entrenching false narratives and norms in the public consciousness on social and political roles of genders, leading to the continued legitimization of the misrepresentation and marginalization of women, the target/victim of post-colonial nationalist agenda, within their cultural society.

Firdaus stands out as a model of the universal struggle faced by women, including abasement, qualification, physical/psychological/financial abuse, domestic abuse, and communal violence in most of the state forms embracing national and Islamic esteems in modern times. The mimetic tendency of her decolonizing state that exerts destructive power and control over subalterns concerning its religious fundamentalism, in which misogyny is deeply rooted in its socio-cultural structure as legitimization for the only possible shield protection against Western intervention, is disrupted and challenged by Firdaus. For women whose fates are drawn and their subsistence erased from the stage of history on behalf of patriarchal interests in a social order built on fabricated characterizations/'knowledge', El Sadaawi's leading character, a feminist activist protesting against her predestination subjected to Islamic culture and breaking many taboos, has become a pioneer presentment in Egyptian feminist literature. In writing this novel, she provides a powerful voice for Firdaus, who was born and destined to perish in this neocolonial time of Egypt at 'zero point', instead attacking gender hierarchy adhered to power relations as a way of revealing her truth and creating freedom on her terms. However, in a world of power-knowledge relations, although the death penalty silenced her whereby desire for a sphere to exist liberally and with free autonomy, will the voice of the woman who lost her life for advocating her truth be heard?

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

An Egypt-born (1931-2021) physician, psychiatrist, and vibrant feminist voice, Nawal El Saadawi is remarkable for her valiant demeanour as both a celebrated and also widely criticized author. She was born into a family of Upper Egyptians that she describes as comparatively liberal and her father was a government official in the Ministry of Education of Egypt who campaigned against the British occupation of the country during the Egyptian Revolution of 1919 that caused his exile. As a father, through his ethos, he imparted his daughter to speak her mind, and self-respect, and to speak up for herself in all situations and circumstances.

Aggrieved by familial and societal norms, with the resolution to model her father and independent liberal of thought, feminist writer Nawal El Saadawi decides her major themes on issues such as women's imprisonment, female genital mutilation, sexual harassment, abusive men or father/husband authority in and outside of marriage, patriarchal social and political philosophy in the postcolonial Arab Muslim world. This radical and valiant position in her writings emanates in one of her most controversial works and the subject of this research paper, *Woman at Point Zero* (1975), discussing women's position as 'double-colonized' in Muslim third-world countries that carry the remnants of past colonial subjugation. Nawal El Saadawi, through her seditionist main character Firdaus, attacks overall patriarchal institutions in Egypt supported by colonial reactionist religious fundamentalist movements in the public and private spheres of Muslim women's lives. Firdaus, as conceptually schematized, challenges the deep-seated notions embraced by Arabic Muslim women with the formation of a neocolonialist governmental system in otherised geographies, such as desperation, obsession, entrapment, violence, and betrayal, and attempts to inquire about the forbidden agents for subaltern women; power, prestige, sexual pleasure, preference right, freedom and love (Köşeli, 2015, p. 146).

Another outstanding and autobiographical factor from El Saadawi's writing, female genital mutilation (FGM) appears as a haunting customary practice for the rest of Firdaus' life as a means of establishing feminine figurative knowledge and following it rigorously in political, economic, cultural, and religious norms within Egyptian society and post-colonial state government. Throughout the narrative, we, as the reader, coinciding with the Islamic/nationalist paradigm coinciding with almost every postcolonial third-world Arabic country, witness her journey fraught with oppression, forced marriage, sexual harassment, violence, insulation, and defamation. Ultimately, the circumstances that de-individualize and relocate women as the patriarchal state's property led to her becoming a prostitute whom she comes to believe is the most liberated woman in Muslim countries as free of any rotten religious or moral social charges. Through being a successful prostitute, Firdaus thrives on earning the most sordid power of capitalism, money, as a source of honour and visibility that leads her to acknowledge the gravity of purchasing rather than being bought with the bride price.

Nawal El Saadawi, recounting a real-life story, indicates to demonstrate the morally and ethically corrupted conditions that Firdaus was born into are not exceptional for most postcolonial Arabic women. Cultural characteristics and religious values of the society hold qualifications for oppressive violence and constraining power over women's bodies as a shield to neocolonialism directed by the West. The legally approved roles of women, for the sake of women's quest for femininity and perspective of their body and sexuality, are disturbed by the feminist activist voices in Egypt despite the distress of being incompatible with the core principles of Islam and fundamental civil rights. New Woman Group formed in Cairo and the Committee for the Defence of Women and Family Rights formed in 1985 were a couple of the sources of resistance to counter religious fundamentalism. Nawal El Saadawi, with the decline of the Nasserist regime, influenced these uprisings by advocating women's rights against the masculine social and political system by bringing attention to issues like female genital mutilation and gender inequality. Especially the publication of the book *Women and Sex* in 1972 comes in terms of signifying another era in the feminist movement in Egypt challenging societal norms and arguing that women oppressed and discriminated against should be empowered through social, economic, and political reforms radicalizing the movement as a new wave.

Along with *Woman at Point Zero* and its heroine Firdaus' reflection on feminist literature in Egypt, It is possible to say that she brought an important figure to the women's movement as a symbol of Egyptian feminism and the revolt against colonialism and patriarchy as an inspiration to courage to enlighten society (Soyer, 2013, p. 92-99). Finally, through the dissection of colonial and post-colonial/oriental discourses and practices referring to established dichotomies between men and women, this study examines the aftermath of colonialism in Egypt on perceptions as it pertains to social and governmental structures as well as the reaction to past assimilation and authoritative systems' poisonous fruits over women in the form of religious fundamentalism. In the light of reactionary outcomes of discerptive colonial impact, the resolution and consolidation of the power control on women through the colonial-like/imitative neocolonial system within the new nation formation and their ill effects on women's political, economic, educational, and social well-being are analyzed through a lived story. Firdaus, in this aspect, appears in this study as a representative figure for feminist activism for women's emancipation from the two otherizing and subordinating systems; western colonialism and religious fundamentalism.

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