

Woman at point zero: being a woman in egyptian society

Sociology, Identity



Woman at Point Zero is a fascinating and revealing novel about the life of women in Islamic society. It is written by Nawal El Saadawi, an Egyptian writer who continues to be a champion for women's rights in the Arab world. The novel gives a first-hand account of the life of Firdaus, a female prisoner, accused of murder. At the time, Firdaus is lodged in Qanatir jail and is facing execution.

In the novel the author explores the plight of Firdaus, and other women living in a patriarchal society, facing constant abuse and misogynist behavior. It draws attention to issues such as the subjugation of women, female circumcision, and the use of religion to shield domestic abuse as well as to view the male population as the more noble and the dominant sex, while the female population is marginalised. The novel is very critical and disapproving of the society and helps the reader to clearly understand the situations, environment and encounters which Firdaus lived through.

As Firdaus's story unwinds, we read about the horrifying sexism that Firdaus battles every day. Firdaus was shaped into the woman she was by her experiences and influencers she had as a child. Despite the challenges, Firdaus adapts and learns to thrive in the shifting environment she inhabits, by first questioning, then rejecting, and ultimately challenging the supposed place of women in Egyptian society.

There were two pivotal moments in Firdaus's life where she questioned the role of a woman in the Egyptian society. As a teenager and after witnessing her mothers abuse at the hands of her father, Firdaus questions how, on one

hand her father can be a devout follower of Islam, and then on the other hand become a violent abuser of his wife. (Nawal El Saadawi, pg 11)

As Firdaus grows, she experiences abnormal conduct from her uncle, who abuses her sexually. While she does not like her uncles conduct, she does not stop him, because it doesn't does not know how. As a researcher, living in Cairo, removed from the country life of Firdaus' family, her uncle is a sign of freedom for Firdaus. She is convinced that the abuse from her uncle and her fathers' oppressive behaviour towards her mother is because they think that they own women's' bodies.

After her parent's death, Firdaus's uncle asks her to live with him in Cairo. She lives in her uncle's house and attends school. She feels good about going to school and compares her life as better than when she lived with her parents. She initially respects her uncle because he saved her from being an orphan. However, shortly thereafter, Firdaus' uncle gets married to a woman who dislikes Firdaus, so they send her to a boarding school. A couple years after Firdaus graduates with a high school degree. Firdaus' new aunt suggests that Firdaus should get married and settle down. Firdaus' uncle decides to marry Firdaus to his wife's old and disfigured uncle, Sheikh Mahmoud, for a very large sum of money, claiming "[if] he marries Firdaus she will have a good life with him, and he can find in her an obedient wife, who will serve him and relieve his loneliness." (Nawal El Saadawi, pg 37) This illustrates how patriarchal Egyptian society uses religion to enforce that women are only valuable if they are obedient to men. Sheikh is almost immediately abusive to Firdaus mentally, physically, and sexually, and he

even starves her. Firdaus, pushed to her limit, flees, escaping to her uncle for guidance. The following excerpt from the novels explains the situation:

“ On one occasion he hit me all over with his shoe. My face and body became swollen and bruised. So, I left the house and went to my uncle... [My uncle’s wife told me] that it 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.” (Nawal El Saadawi, pg 37)

After this traumatic experience, whatever respect Firdaus held for her uncle evaporates, and she starts to believe the entire concept of marriage is a trap, as she sees it to be full of trickery.

This is the second time that Firdaus questions what it means to be a woman in Egyptian society, and the teachings of her religion. If religion exemplifies humanity and mercy, why is the practice of it used to control women?

Through the same thought process, Firdaus quickly comes to learn that her religion is just another tool used to oppress women and destroy their basic human rights.

With that realization Firdaus responds by rejecting the traditional, submissive role that the Egyptian society and Islam force upon women. She becomes a prostitute, initially for survival, but eventually she views it as an active, empowering choice providing her with self-respect. Respect is not one of Firdaus’ goals until Di’aa, a prostitute, points out that even if she is not under the control of any man, Firdaus will not have any respect in society

until she makes money herself. Money brings status; if Firdaus has no money, the world doesn't have reason to pay attention. She is just an invisible person occupying the role of daughter or wife. Shortly after she finally gathers some wealth and power, the world starts to notice. Firdaus realizes that men take notice because they are power-hungry and can't accept that a woman has power over them. They try to minimize Firdaus' power by judging her work as a prostitute as shameful, even though men were just as involved in the exchange of sex and money. For the men in Firdaus' story, respectable women are those who are obedient and are willing to live under the protection of a powerful man.

When Firdaus gets told that the work she is in is not respectable, and is shameful, she is hurt and decides to leave the prostitute life behind and move on to becoming a respectable woman by getting an office job. She realises that she is gaining respect by submitting to the power of a man again.

Firdaus' relationship with Ibrahim is a direct result of her journey of finding respect. Firdaus is satisfied that she's finally living by the rules. For the first time in Firdaus life, she feels as though she's met a man she can trust. Firdaus' sacrifices made to become a respectable woman seem to be paying off, until Firdaus uncovers that Ibrahim was just using her for sex. She once again has fallen into the trap of a societal norm.

She realizes that respectability is a trap it is designed to keep women at the mercy of men. She instantly quits her office job and takes up prostitution

again. By doing so, Firdaus rejects her journey of becoming a respectable woman in favor of a life of power and self-determination. Firdaus finally understands that respectability in Egyptian society, means being under a man's rule, and so she rejects respectability as a goal.

Firdaus challenges the question of what it means to be a woman by becoming an equal to man. Near the end of her story, Firdaus meets the most vicious male character, Marzouk, a manipulative pimp who takes most of Firdaus' earnings by force. Firdaus' apparent freedom is once again restricted by a man. Rapidly, she realizes "[she] [is] not nearly as free as [she] had imagined [herself] to be". Even a prostitute who is as free as she was doesn't hold much power, especially one that is oppressed by a pimp. Firdaus' illusion of choosing what she wants is crushed. Her role under Marzouk is the same as of a wife in a marriage or a pawn in a corrupt government, all because she is a woman. As a woman, she will never attain the freedom she seeks.

With this awareness and frustration at her helpless situation she stabs and kills Marzouk. She feels free and living again. While wandering the streets she meets an Arab prince and tells him of Marzouk's murder. The prince has her arrested and she is condemned to death for murder. She realizes that the men want to kill her so that they can live.

At a young age, she was forced to accept that her status in society shouldn't and will never surpass or equal a man's. Firdaus takes us, the audience through her dramatic and horrifying childhood and later to her traumatic life.

From a young age being abused and witnessing the abuse of her mother by her father, to the twisted molestation by her uncle, betrayal by lovers, and on to hostile exploitation by pimps, and lastly the lack of freedom in her society for women. At the end of the novel Firdaus explains what it means to be a woman to Nawal El Saadawi. By first questioning, then rejecting, and ultimately challenging the place of women in Egyptian society.