

# Woman at point zero by nawal el saadawi: character analysis

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## World Literature Paper

Oppression is defined as prolonged cruel, or unjust treatment or control and the state of being subject to such treatment or control. In *Woman at Point Zero* the main character, Firdaus, is faced with such cruel and unjust treatment. Firdaus is a symbol of women and the oppression they go through. In the novel *Woman at Point Zero*, Nawal El Saadwi uses first person point of view to develop Firdaus as a sympathetic character in order to develop a theme of the oppression of women in society.

The novel is a narrative told by Firdaus on the day she is scheduled to be executed. It about her life and what she goes through and how men have treated her. It seems as if every time she encounters a man he mistreats her. Because Firdaus is telling these stories in first person point of view it allows her to be seen as a sympathetic character. It is easier for a reader to relate or put themselves in her situation and sympathize with Firdaus.

Saadawi uses irony in the novel to display an example of oppression that women face. A police officer approaches Firdaus and uses her against her will for sexual favors. Saadawi choose to have a police officer approach her to show that all men, even the ones who are viewed as someone who is meant to protect you, take advantage of women. Irony is also displayed when the officer is speaking to Firdaus saying that it is his “ duty to arrest [her] and others of [her] kind. To clean up the country, and protect respectable families from the likes of [her].” He is saying this yet he is attempting to hire Firdaus as his prostitute.

In the novel Firdaus tells the reader about many stages in her life. It begins with living at home and being sexually assaulted by her uncle at a young age. Later she is forced to married to a man who violently beats her. Then Firdaus becomes a prostitute, allowing herself to constantly be subjected to oppression by men. One man tells Firdaus that her job was 'not respectable' so she got an office job and refused to sell her body for a pay raise and eventually quit and became a prostitute yet again.

Firdaus decides that she would rather be a prostitute than be a wife, but with both choices she is faced with oppression. She explains that "the least deluded of all women was the prostitute. That marriage was the system built on the most cruel suffering for women." When Firdaus was married her husband was a "virtuous man," who beat her; however according to her uncles wife, "a virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience." Her husband was the epitome of a man whom oppressed women, "one day he discovered some leftover scraps of food, and started yelling at me so loudly that all the neighbors could hear. After this incident, he got into the habit of beating me whether he had a reason for it or not." Firdaus, unlike most women, did not think this was acceptable behavior so she ran away to her uncle's house where he told her that "all husbands beat their wives, and [her] uncles wife added that her husband often beat her."

The stories Firdaus tells us emphasizes how women are oppressed in this society. She says that "All women are prostitutes of one kind or another," because no matter what a woman does she will be subjected to oppression.

Firdaus learns that no matter what she does, whether it is working in an office, prostitution, or being married, she will always be viewed as lesser than a man. “ Every single man I [got] to know filled me but with one desire: to lift my hand and bring it smashing down on his face. But because I am a woman I have never has the courage to lift my hand,” Because Firdaus is a woman she cannot stand up for herself. She has to allow men to treat her the way they do because she is not allowed to do anything in terms of standing up to a man in this society.

Because Saadawi chooses to begin Firdaus’s journey in prostitution under the influence of a man, emphasizes the way men oppress women. Her first unjust sexual encounter was with her uncle. He molested her at a young age in her own home. After that she meets Bayoumi. When Firdaus meets Bayoumi he seems like a very nice man. He allows Firdaus to stay with him until she can get back up on her feet and on the way home he asks her if she “ prefers oranges or tangerines,” giving Firdaus a sense of power in being able to make a decision. After winning the trust of Firdaus, Bayoumi locks her in his flat and he and his friends rape her.

The repetition of events that Firdaus speaks about in the novel further instills the theme of oppression. She is constantly put into situations where men abuse and take advantage of her.

When Firdaus is arrested for prostitution she has to go to trial. She sees how unfair and sexist the system is. “ I found out that the law punishes women like me, but turns a blind eye to what men do,” Firdaus comes to this

conclusion because she was arrested yet the man who hired her as his prostitute does not get punished at all even though they are both equally in the wrong.

“ I hated him as only a woman can hate a man, as only a slave can hate his master.” Firdaus compares being a woman in this society to being a slave. They are both powerless against their controllers, which in Firdaus’s case, is men. This hatred led Firdaus to her breaking point and she killed her pimp. She feels a sense of relief, being free from the oppression of men, “ my body was light as a feather, as though its weight had been nothing more than the accumulation of fear over the years.”

Saadawi uses the realization Firdaus has at the end of the novel to make one last point that woman are so oppressed. She says “ My mother was not a criminal. No woman can be a criminal. To be a criminal one must be a man.” Women aren’t criminals, the men are the ones who lead women to do illegal things. In Firdaus’s case they lead her to prostitution and eventually murder in self-defense. Every man is guilty of oppression, “ I am saying that you are criminals, all of you: the fathers, the uncles, the husbands, the pimps, the lawyers, the doctors, the journalist, all men of all professions.”

Firdaus welcomes her death sentence because she feels that she did something right by standing up for herself. She was offered to be pardoned from her execution but she declined, “ I don’t want to be released, and I want no pardon for my crime. For what you call my crime was no crime.” She explains that “ Everybody has to die. I prefer to die for a crime I have

committed rather than to die for one of the crimes which you have committed.”