

Prostitution as a source of power and independence



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In her essay "From the Women's Prison: Third World Women's Narratives of Prison," Barbara Harlow argues that the solidarity that transcends race, gender, class, and other social categories is a vital component in the fight against oppressive forces. She also claims that Firdaus's affiliation with the psychiatrist in Nawal El Saadawi's novel *Woman at Point Zero* ultimately allows Firdaus to share her story and become part of the collective struggle against "the authoritarian political structures and patriarchal hierarchies of Egyptian society" (Harlow, 512). However, throughout the novel, Firdaus continually turns to prostitution as a way of life, and it's her decision to become a prostitute that poses the question as to whether or not Firdaus can truly defy the social order of her society. For example, Harlow argues that Firdaus objectifies her body and sells it in a way that places her in a role subordinate to men. On the contrary, one may argue that as a prostitute, Firdaus gains more power and independence than other women in her society. Ultimately, Firdaus does obtain some degree of power and independence by proving to herself that she "owns" her own body and that she is the one who determines her own destiny. Therefore, *Woman at Point Zero* challenges "the social order which has assigned women to a subordinate position under the control of her male partners" (Harlow, 512) in that Firdaus controls the ways in which she utilizes her body as a prostitute to gain power and independence. The first time Firdaus becomes aware of her own power is when Sharifa introduces her to prostitution. Sharifa is the one who, through the skillful application of cosmetics, helps Firdaus to see her inner beauty and strength. Firdaus claims that Sharifa opens her eyes to unseen features of her face and body, making her more aware and understanding of them. And it's with Sharifa's help that Firdaus discovers

<https://assignbuster.com/prostitution-as-a-source-of-power-and-independence/>

that she has “ black eyes with a sparkle that attract other eyes like a magnet” (Saadawi, 58). Beauty for Firdaus is one way she is able control her own body. For example, a man does not determine how Firdaus’s hair will be styled, what clothes she will wear, or how her make-up will be applied. Rather, it’s Firdaus herself who determines her appearance. Therefore, Firdaus uses her beauty as a way to lure and tease the men in her society. And while staying with Sharifa, Firdaus learns that she is the one who determines her own value. Instead of seeing her nose as big and round, Firdaus begins to see it with the “ fullness of a strong passion that can turn to lust” (Saadawi, 58). She begins to embrace her appearance, which in return, raises her self-confidence, something she once lacked in childhood. By embracing her beauty and increasing her self-confidence, Firdaus is able to gain power and control, thus challenging the claim that men are in control of women. Although Firdaus learns to appreciate her beauty under the guidance of Sharifa, Firdaus decides to leave because she realizes that she needs to make her own money if she wants to obtain her own power and independence. And it’s not long after leaving Sharifa that Firdaus sleeps with a man who gives her a ten-pound note. This is the first time that Firdaus realizes that in order to obtain power, independence, and respect, she must acquire a lot of money. When Firdaus goes to the restaurant and gives the waiter the ten-pound note, she is treated with respect, and she realizes it’s the first time in her life that she eats “ without being watched by two eyes gazing into [her] plate to see how much food [she] took” (Saadawi, 71). The waiter even bows over the table with a movement of “ respectful humility” (Saadawi, 71) as he collects Firdaus’s money. This shows Firdaus’s control over him, which in return gives her a feeling of power and superiority that

<https://assignbuster.com/prostitution-as-a-source-of-power-and-independence/>

she has never felt before. The encounter with the waiter also helps Firdaus to understand how she can utilize her body in such a way that will allow her to acquire enough money to live independently. Firdaus's apparent control also supports the claim that *Woman at Point Zero* challenges the social order that traditionally places men above women. After leaving the restaurant, Firdaus begins to believe in herself: she ceases to bend her head down or to look away. Instead, she walks the streets with her head held high and her eyes looking straight ahead. She even exclaims, " My footsteps struck the ground with force, with a new elation" (Saadawi, 73). As men pass her on the streets, Firdaus utilizes her control by declining the men's invitations. She repeatedly mutters no, which puzzles them. One such male persistently asks Firdaus, " Well, why not?" and Firdaus confidently responds: " Because there are plenty of men and I want to choose with whom to go" (Saadawi, 73). As an independent prostitute, Firdaus begins to choose which men she will and will not sleep with. She also decides on the food she eats and the house she lives in. Because of this, Firdaus begins to believe in her own independence. In prostitution, Firdaus's body becomes her own, to do with as she wishes. Firdaus even has free time to go to the movies and read books. She utilizes her free will, which once again challenges the statement that men are in control of women. Despite Firdaus's accomplishments as an independent prostitute, her power is challenged when her friend Di'aa declares that Firdaus is not a " respectable woman" (Saadawi, 76). However, because Firdaus is so determined to be a respectable woman, she decides to look for work in an office instead of the streets. Firdaus gets a job but then she realizes that the men at the office think they can take advantage of her by raising her salary. Firdaus despises them for thinking such a thing, saying "

<https://assignbuster.com/prostitution-as-a-source-of-power-and-independence/>

the price of my body is much higher than the price that can be paid for it with a pay rise" (Saadawi, 81). She believes that as a prostitute she had been looked upon with much more respect and been valued higher than all of the female employees. Firdaus claims that she " feels sorry for the other girls who are guileless enough to offer their bodies and physical efforts every night in return for a meal, or a good yearly report" (Saadawi, 82). Unlike these women, Firdaus doesn't let the men break her pride. For example, none of the officials are able to make Firdaus bow her head or lower her eyes to the ground. Although Firdaus is able to remain in control as an office worker, she decides that prostitution might be a surer path to dignity and self-determination than the " respectable" life of an office assistant. Upon quitting her job, Firdaus returns to the life of an independent prostitute, where she continues to challenge the social order by acquiring even more power than she had before. She is soon paid the highest price, becoming so successful that she obtains the power to employ any servant to wash her clothes or clean her shoes. Firdaus even donates money to a charity and gets her picture printed in the newspaper, which says that she is a " citizen with a sense of civic responsibility" (Saadawi, 100). By utilizing her body as a prostitute again, Firdaus convinces herself that she has chosen prostitution with her own free will. She claims, " my insistence on remaining a prostitute proved to me this was my choice and that I had some freedom, at least the freedom to live in a situation better than that of other women" (Saadawi, 97). Firdaus further believes that having to be a wife is much worse than being a prostitute, for marriage in Firdaus's eyes is the " cruelest suffering for women" (Saadawi, 96). As a wife, Firdaus had to passively watch her husband make choices, beat her incessantly, and force her to have sex with

<https://assignbuster.com/prostitution-as-a-source-of-power-and-independence/>

him. But as a prostitute, she is free to do what she wants. Firdaus experiences the rare pleasure of being “ completely independent, of enjoying freedom from any subjection to a man, to marriage, or to love; of being divorced from all limitations” (Saadawi, 95). This power and independence that Firdaus achieves proves that the novel challenges the social order that places women in a subordinate position. As mentioned above, Firdaus prefers prostitution to marriage as a way of life, for as a successful prostitute she is independent and self-supporting, free to choose the men with whom she will associate. Firdaus therefore utilizes her body as a prostitute to gain power and independence. And it’s this power and success that gives Firdaus the confidence to defy the social code and murder the pimp. Even though Firdaus is condemned to prison to die, she becomes part of a collective struggle against oppression when she agrees to share her story with El Saadawi. Ultimately, “ Firdaus’s personal story ends with her execution, but the narrative of her life becomes part of a historical agenda” (Harlow, 512). In the end, it’s clear that *Woman at Point Zero* challenges the social code that places women in a position subordinate to men.