

Illusions of respect: tone and techniques in woman at point zero



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Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* portrays a cruel, patriarchal society and focuses on a neglected, pain-stricken prostitute who escapes a childhood full of submission to discover power in prostitution. Throughout her entire life, Firdaus is torn between possessing power and earning the respect of her society. At one point, she is so intent on becoming respectable that she trades prostitution for a typical office job. However, after only three years, she returns to being a prostitute, prioritizing power over respect. Saadawi depicts an inverse relationship between power and respect in order to comment on gender inequities in Egyptian society.

Saadawi utilizes tone in order to illustrate the power Firdaus gains when defying social norms. After leaving her unsatisfying office job, Firdaus believes " she is free to do what she wants, and free not to do it. She experiences the rare pleasure.... of being completely independent....[and] enjoying freedom from any subjection to a man" (95). Saadawi includes " free," " pleasure," and " independent," to represent the liberation she has been striving for her entire life. By using an exceptionally confident tone, Saadawi exhibits the power that Firdaus now possesses to obtain her desires. Similarly, the tone used to portray herself after leaving the office job contrasts greatly with the embedded, self-descriptive tone at the beginning of her employment. Firdaus originally obtains this socially-acceptable job in order to gain respect, but ironically is described by a male superior as a " poor, miserable employee, unworthy of esteem" (81). This man's supercilious tone is evident as he obscenely describes Firdaus while subjectively implying that his self-image and lifestyle is superior to hers. In this position, "[Firdaus'] body was.... hemmed in by other bodies in the bus,

[and was] a prey to male organs pressing up against it from in front and behind" (81). By comparing herself to a prey, Firdaus is recognizing her submission and more importantly, her lack of power. Conventionally, one is thought to have more power in an office job than in prostitution, but Saadawi destroys this faulty presumption by displaying contrasting tones in different stages of Firdaus' career.

Additionally, Saadawi uses an aloof tone to establish Firdaus' growing respect resulting from a lack of effort put into her job. Not only does Firdaus stop searching for acceptance in the workplace, she loses the determination she had when she was so desperate for respect. Satirically, "the word went round that [she] was an honorable woman.... in fact the most honorable, and the most highly considered of all the female officials in the company" (83). The phrase "in fact" particularly conveys a nonplussed and slightly sarcastic tone that Saadawi uses to illustrate her lack of self-empowerment. By losing this power in herself, she gains respect from her colleagues, thus demonstrating the inverse relationship between power and respect. On top of Firdaus' newly defined honor, "It was also said that not a single high-ranking official had been able to make me bow my head" (83). Once again, the standoffish tone conveys the lack of devotion Firdaus has to receiving and maintaining her honor. More importantly, by including the phrase "it was said," Saadawi conveys the detachment and indifference Firdaus has towards this respect received from her colleagues. This detachment can be translated into a lack of power in herself, which ironically results in an augmentation of respect. Overall, Saadawi's usage of an haughty tone

following gained respect shows the inverse relationship between power and respect.

Along with distinct tones, Saadawi uses oxymoron and paradox to comment on the inequities in Egyptian society. Traditionally, a wife is seen as superior to a prostitute. However, after leaving her job, Firdaus considers herself to be “ a very successful prostitute” (97). This phrase is oxymoronic because a prostitute is seen as the least desirable job. Success is defined as achieving wealth, fame, or respect. None of these qualities are ever associated with prostitution, yet Firdaus dares to consider herself successful. To attach a highly desirable characteristic to a dire job is paradoxical. Furthermore, Firdaus prefers “ to be a free prostitute, rather than an enslaved wife” (99). This oxymoron redefines the socially-accepted definition of freedom, because society assumes that a prostitute is bound to her job, and unable to escape the endless cycle of manipulative men and involuntary actions. As Firdaus considers herself “ free,” she is commenting on the inequities in Egyptian society. In addition, Firdaus claims that “ the more respectable the profession, the higher the salary, and a person’s price goes up as he climbs the social ladder” (99). As a prostitute, Firdaus charges the highest price for her body, and lives a life full of wealth and prosperity. By saying “ a person’s price goes up as he climbs the social ladder,” it can be inferred that Firdaus considers herself to be at the top of Cairo’s social ladder, which is a paradox. Society perceives those at the top of the social ladder to be successful, and more importantly, respected. By placing prostitutes, whom society equates with the Untouchables, at the top of the social ladder, Saadawi is illustrating

the different perceptions of success and respect, thus criticizing the profound inequities in Egyptian society.

Saadawi uses metaphors, along with contradiction, to reveal the the prevalence of the inverse relationship between power and respect in the workplace. While Firdaus was still in the corporate world, “ the building.... had two doors: one for the more important higher level employees which remained unguarded, and another for the lesser officials which was guarded by one of the employees, very much like some kind of a doorkeeper” (80). The distinction of these two doors serves as a metaphor to show the unmistakable differences between high- and low-level employees, and further in high- and low-class members of society. A superior employee is portrayed to be respected and powerful simultaneously; yet this concept is spurious. When top executives would approach Firdaus, she “ had no wish to humiliate [her] body at a low price” (82). By specifically using the word “ humiliate,” a bold, audacious tone is created, displaying a compelling respect for herself. This tone contrasts with the other female employees “ who were guileless enough to offer their bodies and their physical efforts every night.... just to ensure that they would not be treated unfairly” (82). Describing these other employees as guileless further emphasizes the poor connotations associated with the word, and manipulates the women’s innocence into naiveness. Also, by including the word “ just” it is evident that the assurance of their job is not worthy of their “ physical efforts.” By offering their bodies at such a low price, they are losing any power that they previously had in themselves. However, this is necessary to gain an austere

amount of respect from superior officials. This inverse relationship between power and respect is illustrated by Saadawi's explicit use of metaphors.

Saadawi's strategic use of various literary techniques depicts the inverse relationship between power and respect, while simultaneously commenting on the inequities in Egyptian society. Saadawi uses tone, oxymorons, paradoxes, and metaphors to display the illusion and different perceptions of the importance of power and respect. In the end, Firdaus prioritizes the power that she finds in prostitution, and subsequently gains self-respect.