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## **An Analysis of Arabic Female Oppression in Nawal-El-Saadawi's 'Women at Point Zero'**

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### **Abstract**

Female oppression is a burning issue faced by women in all over the world. Woman is subjected to male oppression and suppression. Due to patriarchal system women are oppressed at every level. According to the teaching of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, an evil exists in women's souls. From religious perspective, women are there merely for the sexual enjoyment of men and for purposes of reproduction. This situation makes women impossible to seek ways of liberating themselves because religious customs and traditions of Arabic society. This study based on the premise that patriarchal society uses gender as the explanatory mode to account for women's subordination and oppression in Arab world.

Thus this research paper examines for the sake of dominance how said society violates women through different types of oppression. Egyptian novelist Nawal-El-Saadawi portrayed oppressive picture in the novel *Women at Point Zero(1982)* through the character Firdaus who is persecuted by the hands of Arabic oppression such as cultural, social, religious, patriarchal, gender, sexual. It concludes that how the role of female genital mutilation as well as forms of oppression used for being a woman as a slave by Arab society.

This paper examines the divergent subjugating conditions that women are confronted with

daily life. This consist domestic violence, sexual abuse, Sexual harassment, female gentile mutilation in religious institutions and other harmful cultural practices that inhabit the personal development of women in the society.

**KEY WORDS :** FORMS OF OPPRESSION, PATRIARCHY, FEMALE GENTILE MUTILATION, CIRCUMCISION, CUSTOMS.

## **An Analysis of Arabic Female Oppression in Nawal-El-Saadawi's 'Women at Point Zero'**

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### **Introduction**

Female oppression is a problem that still survives in our society. We also live in modern world has not changed the gloom reality that women are discriminated against and suppressed because of the patriarchal construction. The ultimate aim of male patriarchy is to oppress female and sustain her position at second level. The customs, traditions, cultural beliefs, as well as religious rituals of a distinct society to accord much attention to patriarchy therefore the process of domination and suppression of women conducted by said society. Any attempt of women to get rid of violence is conceived a challenge due to long tradition and culture of Arab society. Hence she is contrived to accept her subordination and low class position.

Reality is that millions of women are suffering and being oppressed under religious laws and Islamic governments in many different parts of the world. Any struggle against oppression and for women's emancipation will have to tackle the issue of Arab in power and

the separation of religion from the state. Women don't have a right to upraise her voice against male anxiety. Islamic feeling after the Arab spring uprising have made Egypt the worst country in the Arab world to be a woman a poll of gender experts.

Nawal-El-Saadawi one of the leading campaigners for women's right in the Arab world. She is an Egyptian feminist, Physician and psychologist. She has continued to address controversial issues like prostitution, domestic violence and religious fundamentalism in her writing. Her dynamic work represents the solemn situation of Islamic women. *Women at Point Zero* in which Saadawi pays much more attention to women's predicament in her said society. Saadawi portrays the grim reality through the character Firdaus who is persecuted at every phase of her life by the form of oppression.

*Women at Point Zero* (1982) is a classic in Egyptian literature. In this novel El Saadawi creates a story around Firdaus, who seek to gain financial independence through prostitution. It is a story about a prostitute who is executed for murdering her pimp has become a classic in feminist literature. Its grim look suggesting that death is the only liberating for women in a world where abuse is as quotidian as breathing. Saadawi very skillfully handled the role of oppression in this novel for the subjugation of Arabic female.

This study examines how does the society used their weapons for subordination of women. In present novel Saadawi delineated at every page terrible position of female through the form of oppression due to cultural as well as religious belief male dominated society control over her position.

### **THE ROLE OF OPPRESSION IN WOMEN AT POINT ZERO**

For subjugation of women society used different types of devices in it 'oppression' is one of the major roles played by Arab society. Patriarchies don't cognate upper position of women

over him therefore they heckle women at every level by social, political, patriarchal, economical, sexual oppression in this novel Saadawi illustrates mode of oppression availed by the Arab world in case of the character Firdaus.

**Culture** is one of the major concerns in modulation of men-women relationship due to this notion patriarchal societies generate their status among them. In Arab world culture is a dominant extensive for female oppression. Every society has a culture so their structure is different from other and people from this society all the time engage to preserve their culture through such cruel activity for patriarchal formation. In case of Arab society male authority behaves like that under the custom of culture. Husbands beating their wife as well as servant, Islamic wives have struck beaten or abused sexually for offences on the order of cooking an unsatisfactory meal or failing to give birth to a male child such incidents happened due to cultural habit of people. Same incident happened with the character Firdaus how does societies culture violate her so she don't have taken good respect from them.

El-Saadwi shows oppression by cultural dilemma of Arab, Firdaus believes she is powerless to stand up to her husband's oppression because all the time culture deny her

“Whenever a male child dies Firdaus father beats her mercilessly. But one of his female children dies my father would eat his supper, my mother wash his legs and then he would go to sleep. Sometimes when there is no food at home, we would all go to bed empty stomachs. But he would never fail to have a meal. (18)”

This oppression shows in Arab society how the role of husband played by the molded culture. He is using his status as her husband to justify his beating to her. This dilemma presents us how deeply culture ingrained in everyone's mind. The fact that a wife must submit to her

husband's every wish and demand is due to their culture. El-Saadwi develops the motif of an unpleasant home as a metaphor of figurative prisons due to cultural oppression. In every house Firdaus leaves in that is not her own flat she experiences such operations.

“With her husband she is powerless to stop him as he, beat her whether he had a reason for it or not --- Because of their culture Firdaus believes as a wife her duty was perfect obedience (44)”

It is cultural oppression because he is using his physical power against her. She feels as though she cannot leave because she has nowhere go and it is her duty as an obedient wife to stay with him, as she learns from watching women in her culture throughout her life as well as Saadwi displays Firdaus cannot leave prison by the pressure of her culture. In Arab society's culture is to omit women's from the education power their conviction behind it 'educational power gives women economic independence and the awareness of human rights', hence patriarchal society deny her from it. Same evident exists with Firdaus in the novel *Women at Point Zero* who also prohibited from educational institutions by the pressure of culture. Because she wants taken higher education but his uncle hit her

“When my uncle would clamber into train, and bid me farewell, I would cry and beg him to take me with him to Cairo. But my uncle would ask, 'What will you do in Cairo, Firdaus?’

And I would reply: 'I will go to El Azhar and study like you.' Then he would laugh and explain that El Azhar was only for men. And I would cry, and hold on to his hand, as the train started he pulled away with force. (14)”

**Social** status of human being is a leading part in female oppression. Power is a fruitful

weapon governed under social oppression every person has a power and its objective is to maintain status at higher level due to this process patriarchal society generate their status over the women. Saadwi uses social oppression in this novel to express the theme of class conflict and depicts that social class plays a major role in the Arab world as well as rest of the world. One's social standing will determine how they are treated and their quality of life. Others will judge based on social class of a person, in the novel women at point zero Saadwi uses this is an example of social oppression because the uncles' wife believes she is of a higher social class than the servant girl and she uses the power against her, she does not want Firdaus to be on her level, and is able to overpower the servant girl because of her low standing.

“On a cold night I told her to come and sleep with me in the bed, but when my uncles' wife entered room and saw us, she beat her. Then she beat me also (23)”

“The skillful lines penciled around my eyes hinted at just the right combination of attraction and rejection favored by the wives of men in high positions of authority. Only my make-up, my hair and my expensive shoes were ‘upper class.’ With my secondary school certificate and suppressed desires I belonged to ‘middle class.’ By birth I was lower class. (10)”

How society gives treatment to a prostitute is another example of Arab culture's social oppression

When police man says the Firdaus, “You are a prostitute and it's my duty to arrest you and others of your kind. To clean up the country and protect respectable families from the likes of you (67)”.

It's an example of social oppression because the policeman believes he is of social higher class than Firdaus a prostitute, so he uses a power over her and forces her to have him. Man is a social animal so that his responsibility is pursued the convention under these premises female are harassed by the kinds of exploitation beneath ennobling belief women tolerate terrific trouble considering status is important than anxiety. Saadawi shares Arab's social belief as when woman troubled by their husband her duty is that resist with him whole life because female is a sign of esteem of family household that's why she bear such anxiety by male dominated society.

“When Firdaus goes to her uncle to complaint about her husband's cruel behaviors, physical abuse, ‘he tells her that all husbands beat their wives, and my uncle's wife added that her husband often beat her. I said my uncle was a respectable Sheikh, well versed in the teaching of religion, and he, therefore, could not possibly be in the habit of beating his wife. (46)”

Saadawi very artistically presents the solemn convention of Egyptian society and in what way patriarchy misuse religion for dominance or oppress their wives.

**Gender** oppression is the social and political dominance of women. Many ways in despotism of women concerning men overpowering women physically as well as mentally in every phase of generation. First, deduction in subjugation of women is depended on for the acquisition of important resources — food and child nourishment in order to gender issue occurred in whole world. Gender is a leading curse for oppression of women. Due to this dilemma over the world conflict conceived.

“Firdaus says, ‘a man cannot stand being rejected by a woman’ (97)”

In gender oppression because of a man thinks he is so much better than a woman. Saadawi shows that people are judged on what they should and should not do and say and what they can and cannot do and say based on their gender. The writer uses gender oppression to express theme of sexism and show that gender plays a crucial role in society and in one's life. People are discriminated against every day because the opposite gender believes they are superior, they oppress them. Because in Firdaus' culture women are respected and valued less than men, many instances of oppression arise from this. When one gender abuses another gender physically or psychologically, causing that person or group of people physical or psychological damage. Firdaus experiences both forms of abuse and of oppression make her despise men. El Saadawi shows another example of gender conflict towards men through Firdaus when every man in Firdaus's life fills her with the desire to lift her from every institution.

“All my life I have been searching for something that would fill me with pride, make me feel superior to everyone else, including kings, princes and rules. Each time I picked up a newspaper and found the picture of a man, who was one of them, I would spit on it. (9)”

El Saadawi further demonstrates the gender oppression of men when Firdaus discovers that all male rulers have the same things in common, having an avaricious and distorted personality.

“I discovered that all these rulers were men. What they had in common was an avaricious and distorted personality, a never ending appetite for money, sex and

unlimited power. They were men who sowed corruption on the earth, and plundered their peoples, men endowed with loud voices, a capacity for persuasion, for choosing sweet words and shooting poisoned arrows. (27)”

Research has shown how women tolerate this type of conflict by patriarchy generate oppression among Arab society.

El-Saadwi uses **sexism** as a form of oppression in to develop the theme that women are sexist towards men because of the way men treat women. Therefore, sexism is an ongoing cycle between men & women since both genders mistreat one another, El-Saadwi shows the sexism of men when each time Firdaus picks up a newspaper and found her place in said society. On each and every page of newspaper she found the picture and bulletins of male dominance. In the world male society use women for sexual satisfaction as well as recognizes her as a symbol of erotic fulfillment. But due to this satisfaction he oppressed her sexually.

El Saadawi presents Sheikh Mahmoud’s sexual harassment with wife while intercourse activity but are people misuse religion to such subjugation of women for sexual desire Arab male forget their religious and cultural belief.

“No, your holiness, no,’ as she pulled her arm or leg away from his embrace..... ‘No your holiness, for sake of prophet. No, this is sinful.’  
Then his stifled tones hissing back: ‘You woman,you... What sin and what Prophet? I’ m your husband and you are my wife’. (40)”

Saadawi also presents the terrible condition of Firdaus while she married an old person his hunger for sexual pleasure and how he troubled her. Writer depicts by figurative language the pathetic condition of women and value among it in Arab society.

“He left on me like a mad dog. The hole in his swelling was oozing

drops of foul-smelling pus. I did not return my face or my nose away this time. I surrendered my face to his face and my body to his body, passively, without any resistance, without a movement, as though life had been drained out of it, like a piece of dead wood or old neglected furniture left to stand where it is, or pair of shoes forgotten under a chair.(47)”

“As a child Firdaus uncle uses any opportunity to exploit her sexually. While she is kneading dough to bake for family use, her uncle, under the guise of reading books, rubs her thighs and gradually moves up words to her private part. (13)”

Despite the fact that Firdaus’ sexual abused by men from all walks of life. Her experience never left her outside the room. By physical and gender abuse society oppressed women.

“In fact I never left the bedroom day and night. I lay on the bed crucified and every hour a man would come in. there were so many of them for they were all married, educated, carrying , swollen leather bags and wallets in their hands . They dug long nails in to my flesh and I would close my lips tightly trying to stifle any expression of pain to hold back a scream. (57)”

Firdaus endures this marital rape called sex instead of enjoying it because these men see sexual pleasure as their sole right. The present study explores how humiliated treatment gives Arabic society to female but she also has a sex power but she couldn’t obtain success on it due to dominance.

**Clitoridectomy**, also known as Female Genital Mutilation is a one of the form of sexual oppression, is a common practiced in many traditional African societies especially in Egypt. It is a traditional customs by that cruel weapon society oppressed female in childhood.

“In which a person, sometimes unskilled or health worker, cuts off parts or whole organs of the female genital usually using the knife or razor blade, which for the post part is unsterilized----- it is considered, variously, a cleaning ritual from evil spirits.”

(An international Journal of Language Literature & Gender studies, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia Vol. I (1) April-July, 2012.)

El-Saadwi begins to utilize this motif in the first few pages in the novel when Firdaus receives a Clitoridectomy it is concerned only with the satisfaction of man's pleasure. She delineates the worse condition of Islamic women in the Arab world through this belief.

“She brought a woman who has carrying a small knife or razor blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from between by thighs (12)”

By adding a childish tone to the opening of the novel accomplished by her ignorance and cruelty of clitoridectomy, through this incident you realize however society used **patriarchal** oppression, Firdaus who is seen as victim of patriarchal society's cruelty therefore Saadawi's novel signifies for female oppression. El -Saadawi presents sexual encounters with men as battles which are a symbol for the how she has to battle against oppression of the patriarchy. The following incident shows such oppression experienced by Firdaus. For the sake of dominance and control over her male society behaves brutally. Under patriarchal control Firdaus bear terrible tyranny. Saadawi consciously present the drastic condition of said society's brutality such evidence.

“The humiliating pressure of male bodies on mine when I rode in the bus, and the long morning, queue in front of a perpetually overflowing toilet....

Where he made me lie down on a bed-----What are you waiting for? I have no money on men tonight; I will give you money the next time---- (67).”

On such incidents you take an account of patriarchy used female as a source of pleasure and don't care about her feelings, pains while doing sexual intercourse. In male dominated society women don't have a right instead of housewife so Arab society under religious belief harassed her and to maintain his status on high position. After husbands violence Firdaus left house she meets a coffee shop owner He accommodates her in his apartment and provides her basic needs. While living in his house she expresses her wish to get job. On her wish how male dominated Arab society react.

“He jumped up and slapped me on my face. His hands was big and strong and it was the heaviest slap I had ever received on my face----- the next moment he hit me with his fist in the belly until lost consciousness immediately(51)”

In Arab society people never left women alone in any profession he developed his prestige over her in the novel Firdaus accepted the life of prostitute but patriarchy doesn't left her in it also he harassed her. Under power of dominance how society cheated women and used their authority on her. Even as a prostitute, Marzouk, a pimp threatens Firdaus. He tells her that

“Every' prostitute has a pimp to protect her from other pimps, and from the police you cannot do without protection, otherwise the profession exercised by husbands and pimps would die out.....I may be obliged to threaten. I had escaped from men ...I could buy him off with a sum of money and insisted on sharing my earnings (92)”

In said society women don't have a right of equality and freedom patriarchal society undertake much attention on women due to cultural belief her duty is feeding and caring of child and husband is a life of women so that society gives less preference to her and generate their politics by situation they don't care about their own crime for dominance and esteem he buckled women in any case for punishment. This same case happened with Firdaus while emancipation of her own life she kills pimp but the politics of Cairo region as well as patriarchy arrest her and killed. Pathetic result asserts you lastly Firdaus tired by the hands of oppression which is sustained on her from infancy to adulthood she accepted death is one of the options remaining in front of her to defend by patriarchy.

“Death is a journey to a place unknown to everybody on this earth fills me with pride. All my life I have been searching for something that would fill me with pride, and make me feel superior to everyone else, including kings, princes and rulers.(101)”

Saadawi's rational and radical attitude shows us by incident for dominance, emancipation, and victory on patriarchal oppression she prepared her character by deliberate operation to kill oppression of oppressor by their power.

## CONCLUSION

Thus Nawal El Saadawi tries to show the deep concerns of subjugating conditions of women in Arab society. Under such circumstances her attempt to emancipate her from such solemn conditions. At the end we get the positive vision of woman from this novel. Firdaus not only accept defeat but also got victory by kills pimp is a sign of rational attitude of woman and she succeed in her life, but Arab society don't left her for survival punished her for crime is a symbol of woman haven't a part of liberation under patriarchal convention.

In this study it has been observed that male dominance and their persecuted behavior denied the progress of women in a given societies. Woman in this selected research study is stunning, diligent, caring and ambitious but due to the notion of cultural as well as patriarchal oppression she break down mentally, psychologically and physically.so she suffered by the hands of male power. Whole novel detects woman is use only sexual satisfaction and follow the duty of husband and caring child by said society.

Being a part of postcolonial feminist Saadawi casting the picture of female oppression distinctly the picture of Firdaus gives a contribution of Arabic female, and Arab is a sever region where religious, cultural belief prevailed in order to female take less respect from it. Said society don't give her freedom of survive on their own way. Patriarchal society also misuse religion for their own sake they use such type of customs for subjugation of women under religious belief she tangled by the forms of oppression. For emancipation of female Saadawi depicts the life of prostitute because sex is only one power where man inclined their power against women but the fanatical culture of Arab don't change their nature of existence so Arabic women wouldn't acquire her liberate position among them. Islamic women around the world have a need to join hands together and fight for their liberation.

To sum up these efforts aimed to improve the social status of women and should change the attitude of men from oppression and other violence and prevailing equal standard on each institution.

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