

AFRREV LALIGENS

An International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies
Bahir Dar, Ethiopia
Vol. 1 (1) April-July, 2012: 15-28

ISSN: 2225-8604(Print)

ISSN 2227-5460 (Online)

**Cradle to Grave: an Analysis of Female Oppression in
Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero***

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Abstract

Women are subjected to male oppression and suppression at various stages of life. Unfortunately, female oppression is deeply ingrained in the culture of the societies which ensures the continuation of patriarchal control. This situation makes it impossible for women to seek ways of liberating themselves because doing so will be tantamount to challenging the age long tradition and customs of the people. This study is based on the premise that patriarchal moulded structures ensure that women remain in perpetual slavery. Thus, this study examines the type of oppression women face from infancy to adulthood as portrayed in Nawal El Sadaawi's Woman at Point Zero and the measures taken by the women to free themselves from the shackles of male domination and oppression. It concludes that female oppression is at the detriment of women and the society; therefore, it should be discouraged and completely eradicated.

Introduction

Female oppression is a problem that still exists in present day society. The fact that we live in a modern world with monumental technological

advancement has not changed the grim reality that women are discriminated against and suppressed because of the patriarchal molded structures. The cultural beliefs, traditions and religions of most societies give more attention to patriarchy thereby ensuring the continuation of the domination and repression of women. Any attempt by women to protest against the injustices and discrimination meted by the men folk is tantamount to challenging age long tradition and culture which is perceived to be a sacrilege. Therefore she is made to accept her subordinate and second class position.

It is no gainsaying that women have proved their mettle in social, economic and political spheres of the society by making meaningful contribution to its development. In spite of these, a woman, especially in Africa, is only respected and regarded as fulfilled when she performs her traditional duties as a housewife, mother, homemaker and caregiver who is meant to be seen and not heard. Any other role contrary to these stereotypical roles is regarded as an affront to male authority and ego which results in violence and oppression.

This paper examines the different subjugating conditions that women are confronted with daily. These include domestic violence, sexual abuse, Female Genital Mutilation, child-brides, bride-burning, discrimination in religious institutions and work place and other harmful cultural practices that inhibit the personal development of women in the society. Nawal El Sadaawi's portraiture of this grim reality in *Woman at Point Zero* brings to fore the various phases of injustices and abuse that women grapple with in phallogocentric societies. Set in Egypt, the novelist reveals the deep rooted cultural and religious beliefs which are actually barriers to the self actualization of the female. The story, a true life account of a woman awaiting execution on death row, corroborates Ngugi's assertion that "Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social and economic forces in a particular society" (XV). The various stages of a woman's life and the peculiar type of oppression of each stage as portrayed in the novel forms the subject of the next discussion.

Infancy

The female child faces the problem of discrimination as soon as she is born. This stems from the fact that a male child is usually the preferred sex. Technology has made it possible for the prejudice and abuse to start right

from the womb through the use of sex selective abortions. This procedure has made female foeticide to be on the increase. Firdaus' siblings 'are stricken with diarrhoea, waste away quickly and one by one, creep into a corner and die' because 'her father never went to bed without supper, no matter what happened' (17). Whenever a male child dies, Firdaus father beats her mother mercilessly as if she caused it. But 'when one of his female children dies, my father would eat his supper, my mother would wash his legs, and then he would go to sleep, just as he did every night.... Sometimes when there is no food at home, we would all go to bed with empty stomachs. But he would never fail to have a meal.' (18). Her father's self-centeredness results in the starvation, malnutrition and eventual death of these children.

Childhood

Clitoridectomy, also known as Female Genital Mutilation, is a common practice in many traditional African societies. It is a

traditional practice in which a person, sometimes unskilled or a health worker, cuts off parts or whole organs of the female genitalia usually using the knife or razor blade, which for the most part is unsterilized...It is considered, variously, a cleansing ritual from evil spirits, a female rite of passage, a guarantor of a woman's chastity and her marriageability, and a boost to fertility or to a man's sexual pleasure (Salami 37).

It is worrisome to know that this practice is carried out by elderly women who have gone through the same painful exercise that is enforced by traditional customs and they know the devastating effect of this mutilation. The woman is mutilated both physically and psychologically. Okpara asserts that 'while the woman's body is mutilated for the benefit of the man, the male organ in the course of circumcision gets manicured for the reification of woman.' (193). This reveals that Female Genital Mutilation is at the detriment of women and concerned only with the satisfaction of man's pleasure. Firdaus undergoes clitoridectomy at a tender age. She recalls that her mother 'brought a woman who was carrying a small knife or maybe a razor blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from between my thighs. I cried all night' (13). This single act leaves a devastating effect in her life. Later in her life, she is unable to experience sexual pleasure because according to her, 'a part of me, of my being, was gone and would never return' (15).

As a child, Firdaus' uncle uses any opportunity he has to exploit her sexually. While she is kneading dough to bake for family use, her uncle, under the guise of reading a book, rubs her thighs and gradually moves upwards to her private part. He only stops when he hears a sound or movement and 'would continue to press against my thighs with a grasping almost brutal insistence' (13) when silence is restored to the environment.

Child marriages are common place in Africa. This practice enables the girl's family to get rid of her because she is regarded as an unnecessary liability. At the tender age of eighteen, Firdaus is forcefully married off to Sheik Mahmoud, a sixty-year old rich widower, by her uncle. This arrangement is masterminded by her uncle's wife who complains that 'the house is too small and life is expensive. She eats twice as much as any of our children' (35). This is in spite of Firdaus' obvious importance to the house in assisting with the daily domestic chores. Although she runs from the house when she overhears this plan, she returns home to be married to Sheik Mahmoud when she discovers that the society she belongs to does not have a safe haven for children who lack parental love, care, and security, and whose human rights are violated. She later suffers physical, emotional and verbal abuse in her marriage.

Adulthood

Women are subjected to various degrees of physical and sexual abuse from their spouses. Firdaus' father always beats her mother. She observes that this is one of the 'very few things' he knows in life, that is, 'how to beat his wife and make her bite the dust each night' (12). Research has shown that children that grow up in abusive environments most times end up in an abusive relationship. Firdaus grows up in a family where the father dictates to his family members and maltreats his wife daily. It is therefore no wonder that Firdaus ends up in a violent relationship with Sheik Mahmoud, her husband. Firdaus' sexual relationship with her husband is rather one of torment. At a very tender age, she is forced to marry an old man and goes through humiliating experiences. After Firdaus suffers a brutal beating in the hands of Sheik Mahmoud, her husband, she runs to her uncle for solace.

But my uncle told me that all husbands beat their wives, and my uncle's wife added that her husband often beat her' (46) and brings her back immediately. The next day, her husband stops her from eating and says he is the only one

that can put up with her and feed her — since her family has rejected her and sees her as a burden-yet she avoids him for obvious reasons. He later leapt on me like a mad dog. The hole on his swelling oozing drops of foul smelling pus. I did not turn 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 (45).

Firdaus endures this marital rape called sex instead of enjoying it because these men see sexual pleasure as their sole right. She says,

He got into the habit of beating me whether he had a reason for it or not. On one occasion he hit all over me with his shoe. My face and body became swollen and bruised... One day, he hit me with a heavy stick until the blood ran from my nose and ears. So I left, but this time I did not go to my uncle's house, I walked through the streets with swollen eyes and a bruised face (47).

After Firdaus escapes to the streets from her husband's violence, she meets Bayoumi, a coffee shop owner. He initially offers to help Firdaus and shows her kindness and care. He accommodates her in his apartment and provides her basic needs. When Firdaus expresses the wish to get a job instead of sitting at home all day, this is how she expresses her agonizing experience in the hands of Bayoumi:

He jumped up and slapped me on my face... His hand 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 I lost consciousness immediately (51).

Despite the fact that Firdaus is raped and sexually exploited by Bayoumi, he also allows his friends to molest her sexually.

In order to ensure that Firdaus does not escape from the house, Bayoumi locks her in the room until he returns from his coffee shop. A neighbour helps her to escape by calling a carpenter to break the door. While on the streets, she meets Sharifa Salah el Dine, an old professional prostitute, and is introduced to prostitution. In spite of being a prostitute, Firdaus is sexually abused by men from all walks of life. Indeed. Her experience is such that she never used to leave the house.

In fact I never even 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. I could not understand where they could possibly have come from. For they were all married, all educated, all carrying swollen leather bags, swollen leather wallets in their pockets. They dug their long nails into my flesh and I would close my lips tightly trying to stifle any expression of pain, to hold back a scream (57).

She endures this torture daily until she decides to run away. Although Firdaus resorts to prostitution in order to free herself from man's control and sexual exploitation, Chukwuma agrees that 'in both institutions, marriage and prostitution, man is still dominant, the difference being that in the latter only, the female calls the tune.'(2)

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' (92) Firdaus

thought I had escaped from men but the man who came this time practiced a well known male profession. He was a pimp. I thought I could buy him off with a sum of money, the way I did with the police. But he refused the money and insisted on sharing my earnings. I went to the police only to discover that he had more connections than I. Then I had recourse to legal proceedings, I found out that the law punishes women like me, but turns a blind eye to what men do (92).

After Firdaus tries to protect herself without success, she agrees to share her earnings with Marzouk and he takes the larger share. Firdaus discovers further that

he was a dangerous pimp who controlled a number of prostitutes, and I was one of them. He had friends everywhere, and in all professions, on whom he spent his money generously. He had a doctor friend to whom he had

recourse if one of the prostitutes became pregnant and needed an abortion, a friend in the police who protected him from raids, a friend in the courts who used his knowledge and position to keep him out of trouble and release any of the prostitutes who found herself in goal, so that she was not held up from earning money for too long. I realized that I was not nearly as free as I had hitherto imagined myself to be. I was nothing but a body machine working day and night so that a number of men belonging to different professions could become immensely rich at my expense. I was no longer even mistress of the house for which I had paid with my sweat (92).

When Firdaus, first leaves prostitution and starts working in a company, some of the men in the company desire to sleep with her. The other female workers succumb to the pressures from the men in order to gain favours. Firdaus refuses to give in to their demands because of her determination to protect her self-esteem and to live a decent and honourable life. Because of her commitment to keeping her honour and integrity,

word went round that I was a honourable woman, a highly respected official, in fact the most honourable, and the most highly considered of all the female officials in the company. It was also said that none of the men had succeeded in breaking my pride and that not a single high-ranking official had been able to make me bow my head, or lower my head to the ground (76).

On several occasions, Firdaus, despite being a prostitute, yearns for a decent source of livelihood. She tries to get a job with her secondary school certificate without success because of the bias towards women in gaining employment in her society.

Cultural and Religious Beliefs

The woman goes the extra mile to satisfy her husband because she is meant to be invisible and should ensure the man's satisfaction. The man enjoys this privilege without taking the satisfaction of his wife into consideration. Firdaus' mother would rather go to bed hungry with her children than incur the wrath of her husband if he does not get his supper. It is believed that

women are meant to serve men and remain in this position of servitude for life. In a bid to continue this trend, the girl-child is taught to accept her slavish role. Firdaus says,

In summer, I would see her sitting at his feet with a tin mug in her hand as she washed his legs with cold water. When I grew a little older, my father put the mug in my hand and taught me how to wash his legs with water. I had now replaced my mother and did the things she used to do (17-18).

This situation ensures the continuation of the woman's position of servitude from one generation to the next.

Women are deceived to succumb to traditional blackmail that 'A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience' (44). Women are taught to be submissive wives and dutiful mothers without the opportunity of questioning the oppressive and subjugating acts of the men. When Firdaus goes to tell her uncle and his wife that her husband assaults her physically, she is told to go back home and endure the beating. According to them, wife battering is traditionally accepted and a woman is not supposed to complain. Firdaus is forced to accept that her status in the society should never surpass or equal that of a man and is made to believe that she is there to help him live life more effectively. The man can invade the privacy of a woman, according to the dictates of culture. This makes her handicapped in an oppressive society. Sheik Mahmoud and Bayoumi molest Firdaus because culture demands that she submits to male authority. These constraints make women seek opportunities to break free of these stifling relationships in an oppressive situation. Lionett states that Dikeledi in Bessie Head's 'The Collector of Treasures' and Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero* are

characters who come to feel that they are being denied the most elementary form of recognition and visibility and are ever thus driven to murder as a result of the 'inexpressibility' and cultural invisibility of their pain and dehumanisation (211).

The notion that the girl-child is culturally invisible informs the decision of parents to deny them education. Preference is given to the male-child to her

own detriment. Firdaus is denied education because it is uncultural to operate on the same pedestal with men.

Firdaus also observes that the men who exploit the poor and oppress women invoke Allah's blessings and observe their prayers dutifully. When she goes to her uncle to complain about her husband's incessant physical abuse, he tells her that 'all husbands beat their wives...it was precisely men well versed in their religion who beat their wives; the precepts of religion permitted such punishment' (44). This is an obvious misuse of religion or even its flagrant violation that such men can exploit and oppress their wives.

From the foregoing discussion, it is apparent that these women are subjected to male oppression and abuse. These women struggle to endure the humiliating experiences because they are in a patriarchal society that favours the men to the detriment of the female. These oppressive, inhuman, subjugating and cruel environments in which these women find themselves retard their social, economic and physical growth. An attitudinal change on the part of the men that perpetrate these injurious acts can certainly improve the lot of the women. Indeed, these women need equal opportunities to function as complementary partners in progress with the men. It is then that society can be the better for it. In this way, the woman would no longer remain culturally invisible at the background but can also contribute meaningfully to the common good of society.

It is worthy of note at this juncture that these women succeed without dependence on men because they know their self-worth. They, by their resilience and determination, debunk the erroneous belief that women cannot be successful without men. They chart a new course for their lives despite the prevailing unfavourable situations that militate against their social integration in the predominantly phallogocentric communities.

The foregoing discussion reveals that women — from childhood to adulthood — experience one form of abuse or another. Below is a table showing the type of abuse that women undergo at different stages of their lives.

Gender Violence throughout a Woman's Life

Phase	Type of Violence
Prenatal	Sex-selective abortions, battering during pregnancy, coerced pregnancy (rape during war)
Infancy	Female infanticide, emotional and physical abuse, differential access to food and medical care
Childhood	Genital mutilation; incest and sexual abuse; differential access to food, medical care, and education; child prostitution
Adolescence	Dating and courtship violence, economically coerced sex, sexual abuse in the workplace, rape, sexual harassment, forced prostitution
Reproductive	Abuse of women by intimate partners, marital rape, dowry abuse and murders, partner homicide, psychological abuse, sexual abuse in the workplace, sexual harassment, rape, abuse of women with disabilities
Old Age	Abuse of widows, elder abuse (which affects mostly women)

Source: Heise, L. 1994. *Violence Against Women: The Hidden Health Burden*. World Bank Discussion Paper. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank.

Effects of Abuse and Violence on Women and Children

Abused women are more likely than others to suffer from depression, anxiety, psychosomatic symptoms, eating problems, sexual dysfunction and many reproductive health problems, including miscarriage and stillbirth, premature delivery, Sexually Transmitted Infections, unwanted pregnancies and unsafe abortions. Sexually abused children tend to end up in abusive relationships and have a higher than normal risk of becoming involved in prostitution and drugs.

Firdaus feels rejected in the patriarchal society because no one cares to show her a little love and care. From childhood, her father neglects her and fails to show her fatherly love and care. Her mother who is absorbed in her father's tyrannical control has little or no time to give her children the care and love that a child yearns for in a mother. During her teenage years, she is exploited for selfish reasons by her uncle and his wife. As an adult she is exploited and molested by Sheik Mahmoud, her husband, Bayoumi and even Sharifa, a fellow woman. The only man she falls in love with — Ibrahim — deceives her and gets engaged to his boss's daughter. She discovers that she is vulnerable in a society where everyone exploits her because she is a woman. She feels lonely and rejected in the patriarchal society.

Children that are abused sexually or undergo female circumcision end up having a phobia for sex and rarely enjoy it. Due to the clitoridectomy experience, Firdaus only endures sex. In her sexual relationship with Sheik Mahmoud, Bayoumi and his friends, and the men she meets when she becomes a prostitute, she regards sex as time for enduring pain. She always talks of a pleasure that

I could feel it somewhere, like a part of my being which had been born with me when I was born, but had not grown with me when I had grown, like a part of my being that I had once known, but I left behind when I was born. A cloudy awareness of something that could have been, and yet was never lived (30).

Teenage brides with much older husbands often have limited capacity to negotiate sexual relations, contraception, child-bearing, as well as other aspects of domestic life. They often have limited autonomy, freedom of movement and face higher risks in their pregnancies, including obstructed labour leading to Obstetric Fistula or Vesico-Vaginal Fistula. They are more likely to be beaten and threatened due to their young age and inexperience. Firdaus' movement is closely monitored by her husband. She is also physically molested and sexually abused by him. She recounts her experience in this way:

All day long he remained by my side in the house, or in the kitchen, watching me as I cooked or washed. If I dropped the packet of soap or spilled a few grains on the floor, he would jump up from his chair and complain at me for being careless. And if I pressed a little more firmly than usual on the spoon as I took ghee out of the tin for cooking, he would scream out in anger, and draw my attention to the fact that the contents were diminishing more rapidly than they should. When the dustman came to empty the refuse from the bin, he would go through it carefully before putting it out on the landing. One day he discovered some leftover scraps of food, and started yelling at me so loudly, that all the neighbours could hear. After this incident, he got into the habit of beating me whether he had a reason for it or not (44).

All these happenings are possible because, she is in a relationship where the man is older and stronger and she is made to face this humiliation daily. Firdaus' marriage at a tender age makes her vulnerable and weak to protest and fight for her rights in the oppressive marriage. Her inexperience and age and her mother's timidity and docility make them susceptible to the attacks from their spouses. The devaluation of women in marriage makes it difficult for these women 'to find sanctuary within the confines of their homes, or in the hands of their own husbands' (Strong-Leek 2)

This vulnerability is increased by the inadequate exposure to society and the denial of educational opportunities. Although Firdaus loves education, she is denied access to it because it is regarded as the sole preserve of the men. Moreover, 'the university' is 'a place where she will be sitting side by side with men' (36) and she will have a weapon to fight back when molested. She knows that education empowers women and paves the way to financial independence. On several occasions, she yearns for a decent source of livelihood and has an insatiable quest for knowledge. She is unable to achieve these aims because of her low educational qualification and the patriarchal bias towards the education of the girl-child. This contributes to her choosing prostitution as an alternative. The educational power which leads to economic independence and the awareness of individual human rights are taken away from her. This denial of educational opportunities makes women prone to their spouses' attacks and abuse. The fear of poverty and feeling of insecurity make them choose to remain in wedlocks that are clearly unworkable.

Kind and good-natured women turn to heartless and cruel ones when abused often. Sharifa's sad experiences of molestation from men make her decide to be hard-hearted. She says 'my skin is soft, but my heart is cruel and my bite is deadly, like a snake' (54). Women are known to be caring, kind-hearted, loving, gentle and tender but unfavourable and oppressive situations can change them. This is not a good omen for our society since women are the ones who bring forth children to the world and nurse them. It is obvious that these women are transformed into 'twisted ribs' (Opara42) because of oppression in the patriarchal society.

Firdaus is sentenced to death by hanging for killing Marzouk, the pimp. Although she is told to appeal to the president of her country, since she committed the crime in self-defense, 'she refused to sign an appeal to the President so that her sentence be commuted to life imprisonment' (1). For

her, death which 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). In other words, she will be finally free from the clutches of male subjugation.

Observations and Conclusion

Sadaawi has shown a deep concern about certain subjugating conditions that women undergo. In her concern are attempts to evoke those subjugating circumstances of women in order to arouse our pity for them and then to emancipate them from such conditions. In the end, what emerges is a positive vision of women different from what has been in existence in the societies that informed the background and setting of the novel.

In this study, it has been observed that male chauvinism and oppression militate against the progress of women in the given societies. The women in the selected work for this study are portrayed as hardworking, caring and law abiding citizens, but due to the daily oppression and subjugation that they suffer from the men, they resort to unconventional, violent means to liberate themselves. It is also observed that the women are oppressed and discriminated against right from childhood, thereby putting them in a disadvantaged position right from childhood without giving them a fair level ground with their counterparts to grow in a healthy social environment.

In the Islamic society, the setting of *Woman at Point Zero*, where Firdaus finds herself, it is observed that male oppression is backed by religious authority and not frowned at by law enforcement agents. A pimp is not punished for his indecent activities but raids and arrests are carried out on prostitutes. Although these men are religious and observe their daily religious obligations, they still regard oppression and subjugation of women as a normal way of life.

The subjugation of women is a plague that cuts across African societies. This social evil of marginalization that cuts across an entire continent calls for a concerted effort from women around the world to join hands together and fight for their liberation. Since suffering is a common denominator that they share together, they need to unite and see to its stoppage.

In spite of these efforts aimed at improving the social status of women, a definite attitudinal change from men with oppressive tendencies, gender

mainstreaming and ensuring equal access to opportunities for both men and women will go a long way in improving the lot of women. In other words, gender issues should play a central role in all social restructuring. Women should be included in the contemporary social and political transformations and regarded as co-partners in the developmental process of the society.

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