

On the Condition of the Colonized Woman: the Nervous Conditions of Firdaus in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1983), Giunti, Firenze 2001.

Nawal El Saadawi is an Egyptian novelist, a doctor and a militant writer on Arab women's life conditions. She was born in 1931 in the village of Kafr Tahla in the Egyptian Delta, and attended college at the Faculty of Medicine in Cairo, "one of approximately fifty women among hundreds of men (Malti Douglas 1995, p. 11). Nawal El Saadawi is known for her controversial writings, often an invitation to question authority and patriarchal power. Dismissed from Ministry of Health, Chief Editor of an important health journal, Assistant General Secretary in the Medical Association in Egypt, and imprisoned in 1981 for her courageous political activity, Nawal El Saadawi has often been silenced for advocating women's liberation. Her *Arab Women's Solidarity Association*, an international organization dedicated to "lifting the veil from the mind" of the Arab Women (Malti Douglas 1995, p. 11), and her controversial books, are just few examples of her important work.

Woman at Point Zero is one of Nawal El Saadawi's most controversial writings. The book is an allegory for women's struggle against patriarchy and colonial power in Egypt, an allegory narrated through the life-history of Firdaus, an Egyptian woman convicted for murder and awaiting for execution. Nawal El Saadawi met Firdaus "in the Qanatir Prison, a few years ago" (El Saadawi 1983, p. 3), when the author was doing a research on the personalities of women prisoners and detainees convicted for various offenses. The prison doctor asked Nawal El Saadawi to interview Firdaus several times, but Firdaus had always refused. Firdaus didn't want to meet anybody, especially "one of them", an individual related to the repressive authorities implicated in her conviction. Nawal El Saadawi had "given up all hope to meet her" (El Saadawi 1983, p. 4), when one day, as she was leaving the prison, the warder warned her that Firdaus wanted to see her. Firdaus had been "sentenced to death for killing a man", he said. But she is "not like the other murderesses held in the prison". "You will never meet anyone like her in or out of prison" (El Saadawi 1983, p. 6).

Firdaus' testimony is intense from the very beginning:

Let me speak. Do not interrupt me. I have no time to listen to you. They are coming to take me at six o' clock this evening. Tomorrow morning I shall no longer be here. Nor I will be in any place known to man. 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 rulers. This journey to a place unknown to everybody on this earth fills me with pride (El Saadawi 1983, p. 11).

Firdaus is "a famous prostitute" that hates men, kings, princes and rulers, gender and class oppressors. Ironically named after 'Paradise', the meaning of 'Firdaus' in Egyptian, all of her existence had been marked by pain. Her parents passed away when she was an adolescent, and after their death she was sent to live with her paternal uncle in Cairo. Firdaus stayed with her uncle until boarding school, where she graduated with excellent grades. But Firdaus was "just one

woman”, and women can not attend the university. There was no place for Firdaus in society, and there was no place for Firdaus at her uncle’s house.

What she can do then? Nothing. The house is small and life is expansive. [...] She eats twice as much as any of our children. So what can we do with her? [...] She must be married (El Saadawi 1983, p. 37).

Firdaus was not yet nineteen when she was married to Sheikh Mahomoud, an over-sixty, physically repulsive man with a tumor on his lip. Her uncle arranged her wedding, and made sure that Firdaus would serve her husband dinner, cook for him, and share his bed and his intimacy. Throughout her marriage, Firdaus was often abused and punished. On many occasions her husband would hit her violently. One time he punished her for throwing away a little piece of food. Firdaus looked for shelter at her uncle’s house, but there again she was told that men do beat their wives, especially religious ones, and women have to accept it. Firdaus had no other choice but to leave her husband’s home, and look for shelter on the street.

Living on the street was a new form of freedom for Firdaus. Finally she could buy her own food. She could eat from a plate where no one had already eaten before. She could refuse male authority. But she had to earn her living by selling herself as a prostitute.

A prostitute always says yes, and then names the price. But I was not a prostitute in the full sense of the word, so from time to time I said no. As a result my price kept going up. A man cannot stand being refused by a woman, because deep down inside he feels a rejection of himself. And so every time I said no, the man would insist (El Saadawi 1983, p. 89).

As a prostitute, Firdaus was desired by famous politicians and entrepreneurs. She could hire servants, lawyers and doctors. She could buy honorability. But the life of a prostitute is “no holiday”, as Malti Douglas says. There is no ultimate difference between the legal prostitution of women in marriage and the ‘illegal’ prostitution of women on the streets. Marriage and prostitution represent two different sides of the same phenomenon. Throughout history, men have considered prostitution as their privilege and their right. They have bought women for their own pleasure when they could not find satisfaction in their marriage. Even though she was independent from her family, as a prostitute Firdaus was still dependent on men, and still forced to earn her living by pleasing her clients. Prostitution was not a solution for Firdaus’ oppression. Her perception of freedom was, indeed, short-lived.

As soon as Firdaus becomes a wealthy and successful as prostitute, she attracts the wicked attention of a man who wants to exploit her work in exchange for “protection”. Firdaus describes her relationship to her pimp as the relationship of a slave to a master: Firdaus had to work for him for days and nights without pay. He would take her money and hold her prisoner. “You will never leave me”, he threatened her (El Saadawi 1983, p. 95). Firdaus could not hide from him. She could not escape. He would beat her and abuse her. On a lonely night, exasperated by abuse and despair, Firdaus raises her hands against him and penetrates his body with a knife.

I raised the knife and buried it deep in his neck, pulled it out of his neck and then thrust it deep into his chest, pulled it out of his chest and plunged it deep into his belly. I stuck the knife into almost every part of his body. I was astonished to find how easily my hand moved as I thrust the knife into his flesh, and pulled it out almost without effort (El Saadawi 1983, p. 95).

Firdaus took the knife from her pimp's hands and plunged it into his throat. She repeated this movement in every part of his body, in and out his stomach, in and out his chest. She describes the pimp as "flesh and blood": subjugated by her power, her pimp became just a body, just like for years she had been a body to many men. Firdaus was metaphorically obtaining revenge for too many years of abuse.

This repeated act of penetration, graphically described with the pulling out and pulling in of an instrument, is nothing short of a reversal and repeated male acts of aggression that for years metaphorically killed Firdaus (Malti Douglas 1995, p. 59).

The killing of the pimp has a cathartic effect on Firdaus: such violent action was Firdaus' first action as a "conscious subject". Almost a metaphorical act for Firdaus' emancipation, such violent action gave her freedom, and it allowed Firdaus to find her own identity.

For a long time, Firdaus had experienced "self-definition" as a problem. Self-elaboration was an empty notion for Firdaus. For most of her life, Firdaus had been treated as an object. She had been sexually molested as a kid, as a wife, and as a prostitute. Her uncle molested her and arranged her marriage. Her parents performed clitoridectomy on her. Her husband used her body as an object for his own appetite. Like a hungry man who wipes the dish, Firdaus' body was her husband's food.

Like the hand of a hungry man who as not seen food for years, there he would be wiping the dish, liking it, and not leaving anything on it (Malti Douglas 1995, p. 55).

For most of her life, Firdaus' body was "not hers", and her emotions were not "hers". Firdaus was controlled by men and defined by men.

I was not my self. I was imaginary, rather than real. My feelings did not arise from within me. They were not really mine. Nothing could really hurt me or make me suffer (El Saadawi 1983, p. 85).

Firdaus' identity was "over-determined from the outside". In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon uses this concept to describe the psychological effects of political oppression on the colonized populations. According to Fanon, the presence of the colonial structure in the colonized society is reflected on the psyche of the colonized. The colonial influence has a "two pronged approach of first abolishing the native sense of self and then replacing it with a white definition of blackness" (Shatteman 1999, p. 208). The internalization of the superiority of the oppressor translates in the oppression of the national identity of the colonized population. As Bhabha argues, the act of subjugation "empties" the subjectivity of the oppressed, and «the compulsory identification with a persecutory "They" becomes an evacuation and emptying of the "I"» (Bhabha 1989, p. 142). This process alters the very personality of the colonized population (Fanon 1978, p. 82), just like happens in the relationship between the master and the slave. According to Hegel, the

relationship between the 'master and the slave' is a relationship in which "only the master is recognizable" (Gandhi 1998, p.17). The slave is alienated, his "I" is empty and defined only by the colonizer. In a context of oppression, every action thus becomes difficult. For a slave, every action is problematic, even a simple act like eating. The slave can not freely eat, because food is the master's privilege. Firdaus grew up in a similar context of oppression.

Firdaus had been raised and educated in a patriarchal system of colonization. "Post-colonial" Egypt held women in a double condition of subjugation: subjugation to the imperial male domination and the national male domination. While the British rule was bringing young Egyptian men into the army, young Egyptian women were forced into prostitution.

Prostitution mushroomed in the streets of Cairo and around British bases, while the corruption of various political leaders and groups who prostituted themselves to colonial interests was further reflected in the burgeoning sexual corruption of lower class women, whose 'dishonor' became emblematic of the condition of the Egyptian state (Saliba 1995, p. 2).

Sexual slavery was not the only form of slavery that Firdaus had known. Slavery involved every part of Firdaus' personality. "Who owns it? Who controls it? Does Firdaus have a right to it?" (Malti Douglas 1995, p. 53). As Malti Douglas argues, every action was problematic for Firdaus, even the mere act of eating. Eating was always associated with male power. Her mother hid food from Firdaus to feed her father. Her aunt hid food from Firdaus to give it to her uncle. Firdaus used to watch her father's "big, camel's mouth" chewing the food, but she herself could not eat. Only after her father, her brothers, and her husband had eaten insatiably she could finally have some food, while all the men in her family watched her: they watched what she ate, how she ate and how much she ate. Throughout her life, men had controlled Firdaus' being restlessly. Only the killing of the pimp gives Firdaus liberation.

Fanon considered the armed insurrection to be a necessary phase in the liberation of the colonized people. Similarly, Firdaus turned to violence to find her freedom. Just like de-alienation for Fanon is a violent process that requires the deconstruction of the colonizer's identity and the simultaneous affirmation of the colonized national identity, Firdaus' liberation came with the violent killing of her oppressor. Firdaus' violent act was her first action as a free subject, an action that filled her with pride. But in a patriarchal society, liberation is prohibited, and just like the slaves that used to resist slavery in the colonial time were sent to prison, Firdaus' liberation is punished with execution.

When I killed I did it with truth not with a knife. That is why they are afraid of me and they want to execute me. They don't fear my knife. It's my truth that frightens them. This fearful truth gives me great strength. It protects me from fearing death, or life, or hunger, or nakedness, or destruction. It is this fearful truth which prevents me from fearing the brutality of rulers and policemen. I spit with ease on their lying faces and words, on their lying newspapers (El Saadawi 1983, p. 102).

Firdaus is the extreme representation of a woman's struggle for emancipation. In this novel, literature is thus transformed into a tool for the 'subjugated' woman to become a conscious political subject. Nawal El Saadawi uses the evocative

power of literature to inspire women to action. She uses literature to take the struggle from the street to the homes of the oppressed women, using the written word as a revolutionary tool. The vivid symbolism that emerges throughout the novel is nothing but a means to that end: an instrument to show the sources of oppression in society. Foucault argued that power becomes dominant by means of its invisibility. The main principle for power to be effective is to be “absolutely indiscreet, since it is everywhere and always alert” but “absolutely discreet, for it functions permanently and largely in silence” (Foucault 1963, p. 177). Invisibility allows power to reproduce political oppression: when the source of power is unidentified, oppression is hard to resist. Visibility is thus a preliminary condition for power to be opposed. A visible and concentrated source of power is easy to defeat. In this context, clitorodectomy, arranged marriages, sexual exploitation and the strong visual images that El Saadawi uses, such as the representation of her husband as a “dog”, or the description of the tumor on his lip, are tools to make power visible and recognizable to her readers. Nawal El Saadawi’s symbolic narrative is an instrument to help the reader identify the oppressive nature of patriarchy in Egypt. In the author’s intent, literature has thus a precise political function: to make power visible to isolated women and “uplift” the veil from their minds. Like the postcolonial intellectual gives voice to the silent ones and makes visible the invisible, Nawal El Saadawi uses literature as an instrument to liberate women, and inspire them to resist oppression. *Woman at Point Zero* is thus not merely a novel: it is a message of resistance for all women: a message that compels women to see that they are not alone, for in such solidarity they may find the courage to “end oppression and to achieve justice and freedom for themselves and then for the whole society”.

“The challenge before women is to break this isolation and to reach women everywhere. [...] A social consciousness based on awareness of other women, and a desire to unite with them to acquire the capability and power necessary in the fight to end oppression, and to achieve justice and freedom for themselves and then for the whole society” (El Saadawi, quoted in Tarabishi 1988, pp. 21-22).

Francesca Coin

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