

## **Nawal Al Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*: A Replication of Western Stereotypes**

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In Algeria, French soldiers made it a point to unveil Algerian women in public as an attempt to free them, but more realistically as a gesture of ownership and power over the *Woman at Point Zero* nation and its practices (Fanon 42-43).<sup>1</sup> Nawal Al Saadawi's text, *Woman at Point Zero*, reiterates these ideologies, equating colonization with liberation of her female characters. Such rhetoric carries with it a severe risk of alienating Muslim/Arab readers. For an American/European audience, the text seduces the Western reader into a state of comfort and familiarity with the rhetoric employed. As Leila Ahmed argues in *Women and Gender in Islam*, feminism in third world countries has been associated with Westernization, making it much easier to attack and dismiss in places where the West is regarded as enemy. By associating Westernization and feminism, the dominant narrative alienates indigenous feminism from the mainstream culture. Because of this association and its resulting alienation of the Arab feminist writer from her culture, some Arab feminist writers, such as Al Saadawi, are accused by other Arab women writers of betraying their culture by expounding stereotypical representations of Muslims and Arabs which make their work highly marketable in the West, where they flourish, while remaining virtual unknowns in their native countries (Amireh 2).<sup>2</sup> Amireh says that such women writers are not popular because of "literary merit," but because of "their fulfillment of Western readers' assumptions about Arab men

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<sup>1</sup> Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*.

<sup>2</sup> Amireh, Amal. "Publishing in the West: Problems and Prospects for Arab Women Writers." *Al Jadid* 2.10 (1996).

and women” (232).<sup>3</sup> Thus, among many Arab readers, “Arab women writers are (considered) just pawns being manipulated and used by the West” (Amireh “Publishing” 4). In this way, the feminism/colonialism link extends to Muslim/Arab women’s literary output; the legacy of colonial and postcolonial, national and religious narratives lives on in the worlds of literature and publishing.

Nawal Al Saadawi as a Muslim Arab writer is accused by many, successful Muslim and Arab writers included,<sup>4</sup> for being acclaimed in the West “not so much because she champions women’s rights, but because she tells Western readers what they want to hear”—that which “confirms the existing stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims as backward, misogynist, and violently oppressive” (Amireh “Publishing” 2). In this context, Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism is useful to establish the relation between the “West” and the “East” in light of Orientalist discourse. In his very influential book *Orientalism*, Said describes the relation between the Orient and the Occident as a relationship of “power” and “domination” (5). The Orientalist always represents the Occident as superior to the Orient: “He [the Westerner] comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second” (11). Said also accuses Orientalist scholars of producing a false image of the Orient and Orientals who are represented as passive and non-participants. To control the Orient, the West chooses to speak for it, creates an image and a body of knowledge about it. Giving voice to the Orient means giving them power and authority. Orientalists have created, shaped, and framed the characteristics of the Orient and presented it to the Western reader, who accepts Orientalist codification as truth. Said maintains that according to the Orientalist, the Oriental is an object that can be easily described, judged and conceptualized.

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<sup>3</sup> Amireh, Amal. “Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World.” *Signs* 26.1 (2000): 215-49.

<sup>4</sup> Among those who condemn Al Saadawi are the Palestinian Edward Said, the Egyptians Sabry Hafez, Salwa Bakr and Ahdaf Soueif, the Syrian George Tarabishi, the Lebanese Afif Farraj, and the Iraqi Ali Mahmoud, to name just a few.

Since the Oriental is viewed as an object, then any change in the characterizations of this object is considered by the Orientalist to be unnatural. All of the given characterizations of the Oriental are concrete and definitive.

Thus, with regard to Orientalism, one of Al Saadawi's detractors in addition to Amireh is Sabry Hafez<sup>5</sup> who believes that Al Saadawi "vindicates the main tenets of the traditional orientalist discourse" (189).<sup>6</sup> In her novel *Woman at Point Zero*, Al Saadawi portrays the Muslim/Arab society according to the expectations and agenda of the Western reader, the same as the Orientalist does in his/her description of the Orient. Al Saadawi nurtures the Orientalist ideas about the Orient as backward, aggressive, male-dominated, and misogynist. This is why there is a market in the West for Arab women writers like Al Saadawi. It is, as Amireh puts it, the "West's interest in Arab women is part of its interest in and hostility to Islam" and its interest in a "region perpetually marked as exotic, violent and inferior" (3). The West embraces Nawal Al Saadawi's writings wholeheartedly because of her stance against Islam and her negative portrayal of the Muslim woman.

Anne Roald, in her article "Feminist Reinterpretation of Islamic Sources: Muslim Feminists Theology in the Light of Christian Tradition Feminist Thought," labels some Muslim Feminists regarding their stance to religion in light of Carolyn Osiek's classification of the Western feminist's "hermeneutic approaches to the biblical text" (19).<sup>7</sup> As Anne Roald states, there are five hermeneutic approaches: "loyalist, revisionist,

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<sup>5</sup> Sabry Hafez is an Egyptian critic and writer. He got his B.A. in Sociology and Social Work, Cairo, 1962, MA in Criticism and Dramatic literature, Cairo, 1970 and Ph. D. in Modern Arabic Literature, University of London 1979. He was awarded Richter Memorial Prize for the best thesis in the University of London 1979. Now, he is a professor of Modern Arabic and comparative literature in the University of London, at the School of Oriental and African Studies.

<sup>6</sup> Hafez, Sabry. "Intentions and Realization in the Narratives of Nawal El Saadawi." *Third World Quarterly* 11.3 (1989): 188-99.

<sup>7</sup> In Karen Ask and Marit Tjomsland, eds. *Women and Islamization: Contemporary Dimensions of Discourse on Gender Relation*, p. 73-102.

sublimationist, rejectionist, and liberationist” (19). According to Roald, Nawal Al Saadawi, as a Muslim feminist, is characterized as a “rejectionist” (20) who considers “the Bible as well as Christianity, Judaism [and Islam]... to be so permeated by patriarchal ideas that they had to be rejected” (19).<sup>8</sup> As a “rejectionist,” Al Saadawi is considered, according to Roald, a reconstructor who “would imply a refutation of existing ideas” of the “interpretation of the holy text” (19).

Moreover, Roald contends that Nawal Al Saadawi’s reputation in Muslim Society is that of the “Western Feminists” and dismisses her contributions as, effectively, negligible and trivial since “very few Muslims outside the ranks of Muslim feminists would find [her] writings relevant” (25). Ultimately, Al Saadawi’s writing about her own culture reflects the same stereotyped, preconceived ideas of the “Western Feminists” such as Frank Hosken, Juliette Minces, Elizabeth Cowie and Patricia Jeffery who produce, according to Chandra Mohanty in “Under Western Eyes,” the image of an “average third-world woman ... [who] leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being third world (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition bound, religious, domesticated, family oriented, victimized etc.)” (65). Of course, the image of the third-world woman is completely in contrast to the self-representation of Western feminists and women as “educated, modern, as having control over their bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions” (Mohanty 65). In *Woman at Point Zero*, Al Saadawi takes the same steps of these Western Feminists and their relationship to the “Other” (Muslim/Arab women). Throughout the novel, Al Saadawi confirms certain Western stereotypes about the lives of women in the Muslim world as being “‘victims of male violence’ (Fran Hosken), ‘victims of the Muslim/Arab familial system’ (Juliette Minces) and finally

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<sup>8</sup> According to Roald, Fatima Mernissi and Leila Ahmed are considered liberationist who “yearn for a transformation of the social order” (19) while Amina Wadud-Muhsin and Riffat Hassan are classified as loyalist and revisionist who accept the Qur’an as divine revelation and they “analyze the Koran within framework accepted by many Islamic scholars” (20).

‘victims to the basis of the Islamic code’ (Patricia Jeffery)” (66).<sup>9</sup>

Many literary critics and feminists have strong reactions to what they perceive as Al Saadawi’s failure to accurately portray the role of Arab women within their families and within an Islamic-structured family code. For example, Chandra Mohanty, in her article “Under Western Eyes,” makes clear how mistaken Western Feminists can be about this location when she accentuates the ideas and beliefs of some Western Feminists toward the familial system in the Muslim/Arab world. Mohanty argues how Elizabeth Cowie in her article “Woman as Sign” suggests that in the Muslim Arab world “women as women are not simply located within the family. Rather, it is in the family, as an effect of kinship structures that women as women are constructed, defined within and by the group” (70). For Cowie, as Mohanty argues, the kinship system is primarily patriarchal and considered to be the identical system of the Arab and Muslim societies. Mohanty considers Cowie’s claim problematic. Since “while on the one hand women attain value or status within the family, the assumption of a singular patriarchal kinship system (common to all Arab and Muslim societies, i.e. over twenty different countries) is what apparently structures women as an oppressed group in these societies” (70). Consequently, according to Cowie, the patriarchal kinship system in all Muslim/Arab societies is the sole reason for the oppression of Muslim Arab women. Muslim and Arab women, under the Western eyes, are seen as “sexual-economic” products of their society, they cannot define themselves as independent participants within their family system. Moreover, according to the Western feminists, it is the Muslim Arab patriarchal kinship system which grants and constructs Muslim women’s identity.

Al Saadawi, compromising the Western ideas about the familial system in Muslim Arab societies, reflects the same

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<sup>9</sup> Mentioned in Chandra Mohanty’s article “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” p.66. I took these Western Feminist claims as standpoints in analyzing Al Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* as a reflection of the Western preconceived ideas about the Muslim world.

tokens in *Woman at Point Zero*. Obviously, in *Woman at Point Zero*, Al Saadawi does not provide her Arab or Western readers with an authentic picture of the Muslim Arab woman inside the family code. What she offers is a stereotyped image that satisfies her Western reader and fills his/her passion, to the extreme, with the preconceived ideas he/she already has.

The institution of family plays a very important part in Muslim society. Within the family, there is a balance established the roles and relationships that exist between men and women. In contradiction to this, Al Saadawi starts *Woman at Point Zero* with an extremely severe depiction of Firdaus's patriarchal family. And it is extremely important to note that there are no positive Islamic-based, Arabic family structures elsewhere depicted in Al Saadawi's fiction. (She seems in fact to be interested only in depicting the neurotic—a very dangerous practice that reinforces Western notions of oppressive family structures in Islam as the norm). Firdaus is well aware of the violent manner in which women are bartered and dominated as forms of property. She begins to narrate her childhood memories with a description of her father, who she characterizes as “poor,” financially double-dealing-knowing “how to sell a buffalo, poisoned by his enemy, before it died,” skilled in the “exchange of his virgin daughter for a dowry” and good at beating his wife (12).

To further distort the father's image, Firdaus portrays her father as a patriarchal figure and misogynist: “When one of his female children died, 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. When the child that died was a boy, he would beat my mother, then have his supper and lie down to sleep” (18). Besides her father's hatred of female children, Firdaus, here and in other places, connects eating with power and the male world.<sup>10</sup> She describes how her mother hides her father's food from her children to keep it for him while her children “would go to bed with empty stomachs” (18). Once Firdaus tries

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<sup>10</sup> For more details regarding this connection see Fedwa Malti-Douglas's *Men, Women, and God(s)*.

to stretch her hand to her father's plate, but her father "stuck (her) a sharp blow over the back of (her) fingers" (19). Here, Al Saadawi delineates a distorted, inhuman father's figure in the Muslim Arab family. The problem of Al Saadawi here is as Sabry Hafez says "not that her characters have failed to humanize the world, but rather that she failed to humanize her characters" (198).<sup>11</sup> The extremely deformed, inhuman picture of the father, that Al Saadawi presents, increases when Firdaus loses the psychic bond that connects her with her father. She denies him mainly because of his patriarchal, offensive domination: "I sensed he was not my father, nobody told me, and I was not really aware of the fact. I could just feel it deep down inside me" (19).

Al Saadawi's negative depiction of the Islamic family structure and of Arab men in general continues when she transfers the negative characteristics she gives to Firdaus's father to her uncle. Later, when Firdaus's parents die, her beloved uncle callously forces her into an undesired marriage to a very old man simply because Firdaus will fetch him a "big dowry... to pay (his) debts" (37). Again, when Firdaus gets married to Sheikh Mahmoud, a sixty-nine year old man who had a swelling on his chin that exudes pus and blood (43), she gives this link between food and male power. In his greediness, the Sheikh begrudges Firdaus her food (as her father did) and never lets up his surveillance of her: "All day long he remained by my side in the house, or in the kitchen, watching me as I cooked or washed" (44). Even after finding leftover scraps of food in the garbage bin, Sheikh Mahmoud begins to beat Firdaus on a regular basis (44). When she runs back to her uncle after a beating, she is told by her aunt that Islam permits wife beating (44). Without even being offered lunch, Firdaus is sent back "hungry" to her husband's house. For the lack of good male character in the novel, Malti-Douglas in *Men, Women and God(s)* explains how Heong-Dug Park argues that "all males in (*Woman at Point Zero*) are evil, that conclusion is unfortunately not true" (51-52).

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<sup>11</sup> In "Intentions and Realizations in the Narratives of Nawal El Saadawi."

The problem with the relentlessly negative depiction of the Muslim/Arab family and of Muslim/Arab men in Al Saadawi's text and her fiction in general has to do with her status within the Western canon of contemporary Arabic literature. Thus, as Rosemary Weatherstone states, "*Woman at Point Zero* has achieved the status of an informant text in US academia, being used to round out the syllabi of women's studies, postcolonial studies, and literature courses that seek an authentic representation of 'Middle Eastern Women's subjectivity and subjugation' (114). On the other hand, for the Muslim Arab reader "apart from confirming to the Western reader the hackneyed stereotype, 'think the worst of the Muslims and it will be probably true'" (Hafez 196), *Woman at Point Zero* is not authentic and objective representations of the "other," but transformative, in which the "East" and its customs and peoples are not merely reflected but either transformed, fractured or denied altogether in the negative narrative of Al Saadawi.

To further increase the dilemma of the Muslim Arab woman, Firdaus's story is told from the vantage of a prison cell. The prison functions for Al Saadawi and consequently for her readers as a metaphor for the predicament of all Arab women, much akin to the text's use of "unveiling" to signify Firdaus's revelations at the end of the novel. Accordingly, Al Saadawi's prison as a symbolic commentary upon the plight of Muslim Arab women plays into Western self-congratulating stereotypes about Muslim women's degraded realities. Of course, Orientalist imagery invades writings, paintings, photographs and postcards which allow the European observer to access the Oriental women. The Algerian writer Malek Alloula, in his book *The Colonial Harem* (a collection of postcards produced and sent by the French during the early 1900s), examines the East-West relationship of the French in Algeria to reveal an intense preoccupation with the veiled female body and Harem prisons. The Algerian women in these postcards do not represent Algeria, but instead "the Frenchman's phantasm of the Oriental female and her inaccessibility behind the veil in the forbidden

harem” (xi).<sup>12</sup> These images continue to pervade the imagination of the Westerner, who regards the Muslim woman as passive and oppressed by her religion and culture. Like the prison metaphor, Al Saadawi’s “Author’s Preface” exemplifies the type of gesture that emphasizes the Western audience’s preconceived image about the Arab world. In her introductory statements, Al Saadawi plays into and gratifies the Western appetite for images of the Arab barbarism. She describes the horror of the prison in which Firdaus is incarcerated as a world of “sudden gloom” and “overall harshness” in which she finds “women, lurking behind the bars like animals, their white or brown fingers twisted around the bark metal” (ii). Al Saadawi depicts an image of a deprived existence that confirms Western stereotypes about the “savage” practices of the Muslim Arab culture.

In spite of the possibility for alternative readings of Islam regarding the respect of women, negative religiously determined stereotypes dominate Al Saadawi’s description of gender. For Al Saadawi, Islam (and almost Islam alone) causes and allows injustices toward the female gender. As Malti-Douglas explains in her book *Men, Women and God(s)* that we learn from Al Saadawi (along with Firdaus) that wife beating is permissible in the Egyptian religious and social system (65). In Al Saadawi’s novel violence against women is justified even by women themselves. For example, when Firdaus complains to her uncle’s wife about her husband’s beating, the latter tells her that the act is legal. At one point in Firdaus’s marriage to Sheikh Mahmoud, he beats her with a shoe, leaving her face and body swollen and bruised. In order to find refuge from his abuse, Firdaus returns to her uncle’s house. However, he simply tells her that “all husbands beat their wives” (44). Even her uncle’s wife admits to being beaten often. Firdaus cannot believe this and argues with her: “I said my uncle was a respected Sheikh, well versed in the teachings of religion, and he, therefore, could not possibly be in the habit of beating his wife” (44). However, her aunt replies that it was “precisely men well versed in their

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<sup>12</sup> Barbara Harlow, “Introduction,” in Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*. Trans. Myrna Godzich and Wlad Godzich. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

religion who beat their wives” (44). While *The Qur’an* enjoins men to live with their wives in harmony and to treat them well, we discover, in Al Saadawi’s writing, that the female gender has incorporated religiously sanctioned violence against women into its own discourse of the female condition (Malti-Douglas 65).

Thus, Al Saadawi’s image fits the first-world agendas and prejudices about the “East.” The Arab critic, George Tarabishi in his book *Woman Against Her Sex*, questions the message of *Woman at Point Zero*. In his opinion, Firdaus’s struggle “is aimed at liberating not her female sisters but herself” and her “nihilistic asceticism” is a way to reject reality (32). In the novel, Firdaus relinquishes all dependence on the community and imagines herself to be in a position of radical self-reliance. Paradoxically, it is only when Firdaus is most fully deprived and debased that she perceives herself to be in possession of untrammelled freedom: “I have triumphed over both life and death because I no longer desire to live, nor do I any longer fear to die. I want nothing. I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. Therefore I am free” (101).

Al Saadawi’s discourse of freedom in *Woman at Point Zero* serves primarily to indicate further subjugation, rather than as a meaningful vehicle for Firdaus’s empowerment. Only as a prostitute does Firdaus attain a sense of autonomy, freedom, and “honour,” and only as a murderer does she come into possession of the feelings of “pride” she spends her life pursuing.<sup>13</sup> The same logic is essential to her feelings of autonomy and security when she is self-employed as a prostitute. After escaping from Sharifa, the high class madam to whom she is captive, Firdaus unwittingly prostitutes herself to make it through the night, and finds that she is paid with an unexpectedly large sum. Firdaus’s first act of self-assertion is to go to a restaurant and to order a

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<sup>13</sup> It is worth to mention here what George Tarabishi in *Woman Against her Sex* states in this regard: “Can we then imagine a more neurotic condition than that of a woman who chooses to be a prostitute and a murderess in order to wage a war of the sexes, reassert herself and with the crown of a princess in a society of men” (33).

roast chicken, and her possession of money leads her into a series of memories about her first encounters with piasters, or coins, in her childhood. After eating the chicken, Firdaus then exercises newly acquired faculties of economic self-determination by refusing a potential client, informing him of her reasons: “Because there are plenty of men and I want to choose with whom to go” (68). Here, her mere perception that she makes an economic decision and free choice, even though is wrong, signals her empowerment.

One of the largest problems evinced by Al Saadawi’s work with the lives of women in Egypt and in a larger Arabic, Islamic context is that, as the Egyptian novelist Salwa Bakr<sup>14</sup> asserts, “the problem of [Al Saadawi’s] women [is] mainly sexual” (qtd in Amireh “Framing” 236). In *Woman at Point Zero*, the initial time after Firdaus’s circumcision that she describes herself trying but failing at sexual arousal presents such an instance. Whenever she is alone with her uncle in her parents home as a child, Firdaus explains that her uncle, the same uncle who later adopts her after her parents’ death, would touch her leg with his hand “traveling up my thigh” and moving “with a grasping, almost brutal insistence” (14-15). Firdaus, however, does not construe these advances as unwanted, but instead mourns her inability to experience them as erotic. The same uncle again becomes an object of Firdaus’s attraction until he marries her to the elderly Sheikh Mahmoud, and her desire exhibits itself on other occasions. She lies awoken at night in a state of arousal when she is a student living with her uncle in Cairo: “I was trembling all over... that my uncle’s great long fingers would draw close to me after a little while, and cautiously lift the eiderdown under which I lay. Then his lips would touch my face and press down on my mouth, and his trembling fingers would feel their way slowly upwards over my thighs” (22). She also becomes excited when overhearing her

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<sup>14</sup> Salwa Bakr is born in Cairo in 1949. She is one of Egypt’s most respected novelists and short stories writers. Her novel *Golden Chariot* is a novel of narrative sophistication which was widely praised in its original Arabic publication and has been translated into English and other European languages.

uncle and his wife having intercourse one night. Firdaus at multiple points in her narrative strives not to safeguard her privacy but instead yearns to have it violated.

Ali Mahmoud, the Iraqi novelist, develops this criticism and charges Al Saadawi of “turning creativity, which is imagination and living memory into a lab to show sick, deformed samples which she presents as generalized social types” (qtd in Amireh “Framing” 236). All her characters in *Woman at Point Zero*, especially Firdaus, reflect a deformed picture of Muslim Arab people. Though Al Saadawi tries to prove that Firdaus is the ideal woman, a symbol of Arab woman’s liberation, for all Muslim Arab women, she ultimately fails in the eyes of her Arab readers. The liberation of Al Saadawi’s heroine is seen through her freedom of having many sexual encounters: “If the first man who comes along does not want her, she will have the next, or the one after. No need to wait any longer for just one man” (87).

At night, moonbeams flowed over me, silky and white, like the fingers of the man who lay by my side. His nails too, were clean and white, not like Bayoumi’s nails, which were black as the night, nor like my uncle’s nails with their edge of dark earth on the underside. I would close my lids and let my body bathe in the silvery light, let the silken fingers touch my face and lips, move down to my neck and bury themselves between my breasts. I would nurse them between my breasts for a while, leave them to slip down over my belly, and then below it to the place between my thighs.  
(56)

Firdaus’s “liberation” as a prostitute will arouse a sense of shame and anger in the Arab reader and cannot be, by no means, a liberation ideal for Muslim/Arab women. Al Saadawi in her portrayal of Firdaus as a rebellious, liberated Arab woman tries to castigate the manner in which stable Arab constructs such as “honor,” “respect” and “reputation” are used in Muslim society to imprison women in the Islamic culture. In doing so, Al Saadawi calls forth all the Western preconceived ideas of Islam and Arab culture: oppressiveness, backwardness, despotism. The

Westernization of Al Saadawi is shown through a comment one of her Arab advocates, Fedwa Malti-Douglas,<sup>15</sup> receives from an Arab woman:

Is not Nawal El Saadawi writing for a Western audience? Does this not make her then a “Western” feminist? An Arab-American woman declared to me (to Malti-Douglas) after a public lecture in which I exposed Nawal El Saadawi’s subversive rewritings of the classical Arabo-Islamic tradition: “I still think she is a Western feminist.” The “still” tells it all, seeking to negate any evidence that might prove the assertion wrong. It follows then, from this Western allegiance, that El Saadawi’s writings do not provide their reader with an “authentic” vision of Arab women and the Arab world. (289)<sup>16</sup>

More important, many Arab critics question not only the message of Al Saadawi but also the form of her writing. The aesthetic quality of her writing has been derided as either unsophisticated or entirely absent, sacrificed in favor of her radical repetitive message—women’s liberation. For Amal Amireh in “Framing Nawal El Saadawi”, Al Saadawi’s “celebrity” in the West “has less to do with [her] literary merit than with her fulfillment of Western readers’ assumptions about Arab men and women” (232). George Tarabishi in *Woman Against Her Sex* criticizes Al Saadawi for reducing her characters in *Woman at Point Zero* to “one dimensional” characters. Such characterization fails to explain the complex human relations and therefore “do not make for good literature” (17-18). Afif Farraj<sup>17</sup> also shares Tarabishi his criticism of Al

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<sup>15</sup> Fedwa Malti-Douglas is a native of Lebanon who is a professor of gender studies and comparative literature at Indiana University. She is the author of nine books and coauthor of three more, she has also published over ninety articles. Her book *Men, Women, and God(s)* was chosen as A Centennial Book by the University of California Press (1995).

<sup>16</sup> In “Writing Nawal El Saadawi.” *Feminism Beside Itself*. Diane Elam, Ed.

<sup>17</sup> Afif Farraj is a Lebanese critic and writer. Got his B.A. in English Literature, 1964, Cairo University and his Ph. D. in Comparative Literature and Comparative Cultures, 1984, Germany. He is a Professor of Cultural Studies and World Literature at the Lebanese University since 1985. He has

Saadawi, concluding that

Character in Al Saadawi's novels is almost an empty board except for the ideological statements written in large type... The Saadawian heroine remains a captive of the rigid ideological text, and this text controls the narrative, plot and the fate of the characters. Her mechanical plot is built around an idea, like an Arab musical built around the words of the songs. (qtd in Amireh "Framing" 235)

Because women's liberation is the radical ideological message of Al Saadawi, her heroine Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero* remains captive to this sole idea. Accordingly, all "the thoughts and statements of [the character] seem forced and inappropriate" (Amireh 235).

Moreover, the Arab critics, Farraj and Hafez, fault Al Saadawi for "her repetitive style, weak language, and lack of technical development" (qtd in Amireh "Framing" 236).<sup>18</sup> As a reader of *Woman at Point Zero*, one finds this undoubtedly true. The reader encounters many repeated words, sentences, and even long passages loaded with the same idea. In the novel, Al Saadawi portrays the same atmosphere, employs the same words and depicts the same scene with the same feelings in two major events. The first one is the narrator's first encounter with Firdaus in the prison cell:

My body bent down and sat on the ground. It was January and the ground was bare, but I felt no cold. Like walking in one's sleep. The ground under me was cold. The same touch, the same consistency, the same naked cold. Yet the cold did not touch me, did not reach me. It was the cold of the sea in a dream. I swam

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several publications such as *Freedom in Women's Literature*, *Einstein's Vision of a Jewish State and Jews*, and *Oriental Cultural References for the Hebrew Language*.

<sup>18</sup> The Anglo Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Souief echoes parallel concern, that "Al Saadawi writes good scientific research, but she writes bad novels. It is unfair that the West thinks that what she writes represents Arab women's creative writing" (in Amireh "Framing" 236).

through its waters. I was naked and knew not how to swim. But I neither felt its cold, nor drowned in its waters. Her voice too was like the voices one hears in a dream. It was close to me, yet seemed to come from afar, spoke from a distance and seemed to arise from nearby. For we do not know from where these voices arise: from above or below, to our left or our right. We might even think they come from the depths of the earth, drop from the rooftops, or fall from the heavens. Or they might even flow from all directions, like air moving in space reaches the ears. But this was no dream. This was not air flowing into my ears. The woman sitting on the ground in front of me was a real woman, and the voice filling my ears with its sound, echoing in a cell where the window and door were tightly shut, could only be her voice, the voice of Firdaus. (7)

Again and in the same repetitive style the same scene is recurred at the end of the novel when Firdaus finishes her story:

Firdaus's voice suddenly fell silent, like a voice in a dream. I moved my body like someone moving in sleep. What lay under me was not a bed, but something solid like the ground, and cold like the ground, yet with a coldness which did not reach my body. It was the cold of the sea in a dream. I swam through its waters. I was naked and knew not how to swim. But I neither felt its cold, nor drowned in its waters. Her voice was not silent, but its echo remained in my ears, like a faint distant sound. Like the voices one hears in a dream. They seem to come from afar although they arise from close by, or seem to be nearby although they come from afar. We do not know in fact from where they arise. From above or below. To our left or our right. We might even think they come from the depths of the earth, drop from the rooftops or fall from the heavens. Or they might even flow from all directions, like air moving in space reaches our ears. But this was not air flowing into my ears. The woman sitting on the ground in front of me was a real woman. The voice filling my

ears with its sound, echoing in the cell where the window and the door were tightly closed, was a real voice. (105)

Because of this weak repetitive style of Al Saadawi's narrative in *Woman at Point Zero*, it is worth here to quote how Sabry Hafez in his article "Intentions and Realization in the Narrative of Nawal El Saadawi" assesses her as a literary Arab figure:

The translation of two of her narrative works—I hesitate to call them novels—into English in one year is indicative of her success in the West, or at least of the success of feminist solidarity in both the reading public and the publishing trade. But the persistence of the same issues and shortcomings in two works written thirty years apart suggests a lack of artistic and intellectual development over that period. It may also suggest a certain disregard for the intelligence of the reader at home, for whom she has been labouring the same issues over and over again, without ever stopping to ponder the reasons for the ineffectiveness of her endeavour. Perhaps a change of tactics is overdue, since the old tactics have failed to effect the required socio-political change. Even a modification of her major strategies would be desirable, in order to achieve her goals and elicit a positive response from her change. But, is she interested in the reader at home? I wonder. For I detect in her writing... that she is more interested in the Western than in her Arabic reader. (189)

As we see from Hafez's criticism, Al Saadawi's narrative creates a gap between her and her own Arab culture. This gap is due to her tireless repetition of her ineffective message about the liberation of Arab and Muslim women. For the Muslim/Arab reader, Al Saadawi's style of writing is so useless and ineffective that she cannot achieve the required socio-political change in her Arab society. Her writing runs counter to the traditions of the Arab culture but has its applause in the West. Consequently, Al Saadawi, at home, ends up being perceived as an Arab writer who writes mainly for the West and

who agrees with the West on its image about the Muslim world as oppressive, violent, misogynist and backward.

According to both literary critics and following a close reading of the text, one can conclude that Al Saadawi has sold out to the West. She is more interested in the Western than the Arab reader. This interest motivates her to draw a distorted reality about her culture, which has an appeal to the Western reader. Consequently, she is considered by many Arab critics and readers as unworthy Arab writer since “she made her name outside Egypt, rather than inside Egypt,”<sup>19</sup> “she is living in America because she wants a Noble Prize. She is writing for the West, she cannot feel the true problems of women”<sup>20</sup> (qtd in Amireh “Framing” 238).

The Muslim/Arab world’s accusations of Al Saadawi as a traitor to Arab culture cannot be easily discarded since Al Saadawi herself proves them to be true:

In a recent interview [Al Saadawi] praises her Western critics for being “objective” and declares that she is not interested in what her Arab critics have to say because they are not qualified to appreciate her personality, which is different from anything to which they are accustomed (al-‘Uwayt 1992). In another interview she makes clear that she no longer writes for an exclusively Arab audience: “Before, I didn’t have the pleasure or the freedom to experiment. But now I want to go beyond that, to experiment with the language, to experiment with ideas, to have more freedom. Even if the book is not published in the Arab world. At first, I wrote for the Arab people, men and women. And I had to consider my audience.... My audience was the Arab people. So If I spoke about something they would

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<sup>19</sup> The original source is Gauch, Sarah. “A Troublemaker in Egypt Stands Up to Her Government.” *Chicago Tribune*, October 27, 1991, final edition “Womanews”sec., 1.

<sup>20</sup> This quote is said by the Egyptian novelist Jamal al-Ghitany and taken from Lennon, Peter. “Speaking Out in a Volatile Climate.” *Guardian*, May 28, 1994, 29.

totally reject, it would not be there at all. But now I don't care." (qtd in Amireh "Framing" 238)

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