

## **The Female Subject: From Objectification to Self-Essence in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (2008) and *The Hidden Face of Eve* (2016)**

**Moustapha Dome Sene**

10700 Avenue Cheikh Anta Diop  
moustaphadome99@gmail.com

DOI: 10.56201/rjhcs.v9.no1.2023.pg1.7

---

### **Abstract**

*The gender issue has long been a matter of great interest when it comes to deal with African Literature, the question of sex is a topical issue in the African cultural mainstream, born out of Man's crooked rib", Women are generally portrayed as weak, sensitive and dependent beings. That worldwide depiction of women is based on manifold aspects deeply rooted on cultural, traditional, societal and religious conceptions and beliefs which aspire to weaken women's status and promote men's authoritarian position. As a result, the growth of Patriarchy which represents a last straw which breaks the camel's, women suffered physically and psychologically at once in an environment where their being are still wretched due to cruel practices: rape, female genital mutilation, child abuse, forced marriage to name but a few which they were liable to undergo from childhood to adulthood. In *The Hidden Face of Eve* as well as in *Woman at Point Zero* El Saadawi comes to unveil women's burden to the entire audience where she portrays the African Arab World and the patriarchal dynamic as the fence leading out of opulence and subjugation. In her capacity as a Psychiatrist, Nawal, in her works analyses and spotlights women's lives. However, as a feminist, Nawal undertakes significant canvas, paving the way for the real essence of the African Arab woman through education, dislocation and prostitution which constitutes a double-edged sword.*

*This paper aims at spotlighting the phallogentric blooming process with its norms and how the power of the female body can lead to empowerment in foiling men's strategies. Through that aesthetic woman can move from dependency to independency from unconsciousness to consciousness, from no one to someone then production creativity and intellection gather around their real being in the one oriented society that impede their essence.*

---

**Key words:** *subject, objectification, essence, consciousness, intellection*

---

### I) From child Abuse to Neglect to Oppression

The question of sex is a topical issue in the African cultural mainstream; generally described as an incomplete being who should be complete in joining a man, woman is viewed as an inferior and dependent person by the African society in common. Deeply rooted into some cultural, societal as well religious norms that dynamic leading to undo women's status goes worth in putting some issues on surface in today literary world. Even if the definition seems to be a gospel truth manifold critics arrived to denounce in castigating those precarious living conditions among women. As her capacities to be a psychiatrist Nawal El Saadawi's works

are most of the time based on traumatic results that women suffer from which boil down to their encounter with men. In the two novels Nawal comes to shed much light on the life of women in the African Arab world, being victim of rape or sexual harassment, being neglected and oppressed the two novels portray the stark reality of the one sex-oriented country (Egypt). In *Woman at Point Zero* the protagonist Firdaus an orphan who was upbringing by her uncle will have to climb a mountain of hardship; that is to say the highest she climbs the most she gets problems without issues since that she has to reach the peak, the tinniest part of the pyramid. Child abuse, neglect, rape, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, violence and oppression were among the burdens she went through the entire story. The more she grows the more she finds difficulties impeding her fulfillment.

Firdaus is the story of a woman driven by despair to the darkest of ends. This woman, despite her misery and despair, evoked in all those who, like me, witnessed the final moments of her life, a need to challenge and to overcome those forces that deprive human beings of their right to live, to love and to real freedom (El Saadawi xii,2008).

As early as the novels starts the authors brings a prolepsis so as to let the reader be aware of the causes of Firdaus' death sentence in Qanatir, being interested in psychology El Saadawi was compel to visit prisons in order to witness and analyze victims' psychic troubles where she met Firdaus who was about to be hung because she killed a man. The discussion she had with the late woman to be comes to unveil to the entire audience the different steps that Firdaus went through from childhood to adulthood, from unconsciousness to consciousness. Being now conscious of Firdaus' conditions which tempt to reduce woman's position Nawal El Saadawi entitled the discussion *Woman at Point Zero* to not refer to her life but also to any other woman in Africa precisely in the African Arab World undergoing the same situation.

My galabeya often slipped up my thighs, but I paid no attention until the moment when I would glimpse my uncle's hand moving slowly from behind the book, he was reading to touch my leg. The next moment I could feel it travelling up my thigh with a cautious, stealthy, trembling movement. Every time there was a sound of a footstep at the entrance to our house, his hand would withdraw quickly. His hand would continue to press against my thigh with a grasping, almost brutal insistence (El Saadawi 2008, 13).

This quote comes to break the sexual touching from Firdaus' uncle who indeed tried in more than one attempt to reach her privacy. Despite the fact that she could not feel any pleasure by dint of a sectioned organ (clitoris), that practice which aims at keeping women virgin deprived them of any orgasm as a result; they will keep their chastity till their marriage. Paradoxically, that practice does not tally with its principles because women were orphan of their virginity at an early age regarding how much important the Egyptian society takes Virginity:

Change is taking place. But the vast majority of Arab men still insist on virginity in their partner at marriage. A girl who has lost her virginity runs a great danger if it is discovered at the time of marriage, especially in Upper Egypt, where her fate is often death at the hands of her own family. If a girl happens to have been provided by nature with an elastic hymen which does not bleed on the first night of marriage, ignorance will be her executioner (El Saadawi

2016, 58).

In the same wavelength the second novel under study entitled *The Hidden Face of Eve* composed of twenty short stories deals with psychological as well physical wounds carried by women. Without the listing of characters, the book embodies three parts with chapters like (The Question That No One Would Answer, Sexual Aggression Against the Female Child, The Injustice of Justice, Circumcision of Girls, Man the God Woman the Sinful, Work and Women...) comes to break the taboo that no one did not dare voice out in the African Arab World.

Like the rest of the family, whether elders or children, I feared my grandfather and never played or laugh in his presence[,,] I was only five years old, but somehow I realized that what my grandfather was doing was wrong and immoral, and that if my mother found out, she would be angry with me and would scold me. I understood vaguely that I probably should have jumped off my grandfather's knees and refused to go with him into the garden when he called me (El Saadawi 35-36, 2016).

Analyzing that statement; one can develop on a social practice which seems to animalize women. Circumcision is a common phenomenon in traditional societies, that latter where the mother accompanies her unconscious daughter to the *daya*<sup>1</sup> stands a mainstream issue in the African society; then virginity becomes a male requirement from any honorable and decent bride.

After being victimized in their childhood, now the part and parcel of women suffer from neglect; they are either banned by their own family and feel rejected by their society. That sense of stigmatization seems to be too heavy to be overcome by women hence they no longer feel life's delights the only thought that comes to their minds is (is my life worthwhile?).

In *Woman at Point Zero* Firdaus is handed by her uncle to a man who is old enough to be her father Sheikh Mahmoud in an arranged marriage.

This is her best chance to get married. Do not forget what a nose she has. It is big and ugly like a tin mug. Besides, she has inherited nothing and has no income of her own. We will never find a better husband for her than Sheikh Mahmoud [...] I will be able to pay my debts and buy some underwear, as well as dress (El Saadawi 2008, 38).

Both Firdaus' uncle and aunt merchandise her body and jut out a plan to bargain and make profit by the former marriage (Sene 2020, 80). That assertion from Sene puts on surface the dynamic related to economical exploitation of women in the African Arab world. That philosophy tends to deprive women from their marital choices that stands as a hindrance to their fulfillment in their daily life. Besides the fact of giving their daughter parents expect more in return: commodities and animals; marriage shifts from a traditional custom to lucrative business.

The marriage customs and laws followed in our patriarchal and class society are the negation of true honor, for they have transformed women into merchandise, which can be bought in

---

<sup>1</sup> The one whose work is to section women's clitoris

exchange for a dowry and sold at the price of an alimony (El Saadawi 2016,102).

Once in their household the woman who is given without any agreement used to face a lot of problems related to their being; they not only feel uncomfortable but are also oppressed in that voiceless environment: harassment, objectification, neglect, physical as well as psychological violence. From consequences of those facts many women are accustomed to leaving or sent out their households where they become homeless and adapt themselves into the street's life with its precarious conditions and realities hence, being a prostitute is the only solution given to them in order to make both ends meet.

On one occasion he hit me all over with his shoe. My face and body became swollen and bruised. So, I left the house and went to my uncle. But my uncle told me that all husbands beat their wives, and my uncle's wife added that her husband often beat (El Saadawi 2008,46).

Saadawi's diegesis unfolds the traumatic life that women underwent through the northern part of the African continent. Indeed, it let to the whole audience be conscious about the reserved fate to women which stands as a storm in a tea cup. However, after being more and more conscious thanks to their school attendance many women start writing in order to re-write the dark image that the African society drew around them, then their commitment represents a kind of revolt leading to their being and existence in the African Arab world. Spearheaded by one of the most devoted women rights advocates Nawal El Saadawi carries the flag of women liberation through her writings she castigates phallogocentric bases and norms. That denunciation will constitute a landmark which paved the way for women to their real emancipation and consideration within the society.

## II) Re-writing women's social status.

After centuries of oppression exploitation and extortion, the female being comes to realize that it was high time for her to stand up and fight for their rights. That fight which is nothing else but strategic and psychological should rise through political, educational, social and economical challenges undertaken by women. One can notice that women were not alone in their daily fight; some men took their pen so as to abide by women's comfort and well being through their writings they adopt a woman and feminist perspective and succeeded in deconstructing and reconstructing a new African female image.

In that token Mansour Gueye arrives to redefine women's social position via some canvas leading straight to their emancipation thanks to education and displacement he posits:

Education and migration are central issues in Postcolonial Studies in Africa. They are instrumental in the enlightenment of gender issues. In fact, they are the means through which men as well as women leap upon to fight the social, economic and cultural prejudices they inherited from colonialism and tradition (Gueye 2017).

This leads us figure out how education and displacement succeeded in deconstructing female status. Education comes now to pave the way for their fulfillment and allows them to be treated as fully-fledged members of the society. That burning desire of freedom is shown through the character of Firdaus when she had a talk with her uncle to get educated.

What will you in Cairo, Firdaus? And she would reply I will to El Azhar and study like you (El Saadawi 2008, 14).

Scrutinizing this quote from Firdaus lets us be more aware of the importance of displacement and education in the quest for something. The quite example is Firdaus whose dislocation begins from her uncle's house where she was dependent to her own flat where she becomes master of her own; from subjugation to self-fulfillment. That mobility shows how uncomfortable a being can feel when he or she lacks something thereby, traumatic troubles become familiar in his or her daily life. Then catharsis methods stand as a prerequisite in the psychological recovery of women and he who would like to leap out of opulence in the patriarchal society.

In the same perspective Nawal El Saadawi argues in bringing a relevant note which stays pivotal in the redefinition and replacement of women in the African Arab World.

Fortunately, education and in particular the education of an increasing number of girls, as well as the fact that more and more females are seeking paid work outside the home, are both contributing to relatively rapid changes in the personality of Arab Women. These changes are making them more independent, more respectful of their own minds and bodies, less prone to submit their lives to unjust moral values imposed by a male dominated society. Such developments are leading to changes in the attitudes of society towards women, and are bringing to life new generations of Arab youth where the males no longer judge a girl by her hymen, or the flow of blood on the night of marriage (El Saadawi 2016, 58).

Having a deep analysis on that statement we can wrap up in siding by El Saadawi's point of view in schooling girls; in doing so they will not only be limited on house chores they will have a glance at other domains which indeed will provide more opportunities in life work. Then beyond opportunities/the scope/ possibilities that school gives to women they know from now on their rights which get them rid off any kind of Dutch courage. Education is indeed very significant in women's life and struggle, in the sense that it emboldens them, to have access to various sectors of life which, in turn, liberate them from all forms of discrimination. Moreover, education equips women with all they need to make their dreams comes true and then cultivate them in better individual.

Dealing with women's paths leading to their existence guides us to a topical angle labelled Prostitution. They fall back on various medium in order to empower themselves. In selling her body the woman feels a socioeconomic independency in the patriarchal society. It is also a weapon for gaining control of their bodies. From the dusk of poverty, she now can afford commodities extremely important in her life. Then prostitution is portrayed here as a double-edged sword meaning despite the negative connotation that people have on the practice it represents a strong socle in women empowerment. In *Woman at Point Zero* the protagonist Firdaus got respect and consideration in her community where she becomes more valuable thanks to prostitution.

Because I was intelligent, I preferred to be a free prostitute, rather than an enslaved wife. Every time I gave my body, I charged the highest price. I could employ any number of servants to wash my clothes and clean my hoes, hire a lawyer no matter how expensive

to defend my honor, pay a doctor for an abortion, buy a journalist to publish my picture and write something about me in newspapers. Everybody has a price and every profession is paid a salary. The more respectable the profession, the higher the salary, and a person's price goes up as he climbs the social ladder (El Saadawi 2008, 99).

In that case Firdaus shows how a being precisely a woman who lost her honor and dignity can get it back through that economic practice. Firdaus at the beginning was not given fully importance arrives to have see men running behind her; she now becomes a successful prostitute whose utter wish is to "be", to be her own decision maker who would choose what to do at any time. Nawal El Saadawi argues in saying in *The Hidden Face of Eve* where she lays emphasis on the economical aspects that arise from prostitution and how they help women reconstitute their fate and to gain one more time their real place.

Economic rights help to change the status of women and make them equal to men so that even their name receives an equal standing and is sufficient to carry with it 'honorability, social approval and legal rights to the children (El Saadawi 2016, 104).

She really advocates the legalization of prostitution which will allow women be at ease while practicing it in positing that prostitution is viewed as a tool for women in patriarchal societies to be free from men's domination.

Women empowerment can be achieved in not getting married; thereby, they will be able to draw their life as they please and will not be under the yoke of men. Being single is a status that many female writers put forth in that context Fatou Diouf Kandji arrives to demonstrate sexual hindrance which can push a woman to be exploited by a male character she says:

The sexual revolution benefits men only. It is male-oriented and anti-woman in so far as women cannot compete with men in license and promiscuity: women will always be losers (Diouf 1995, 24).

In so arguing, the author sends a locked message to the reader in the length that it is not always compulsory for a woman to get married so as to reach her fulfillment contrary to what everyone thinks. Marriage is then based on male hegemony and domination where the non-dominant lives with iron fetters.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and *The Hidden Face of Eve* the psychiatrist succeeded in drawing the stark realities that women have to face in the African Arab World along their psychological as well as their physical growth from childhood to adulthood.

As feminist-oriented writer Nawal writings are based on disparities and inequalities between men and women which boil down to some social and traditional beliefs. At the same moment of castigating barbarian acts undergone by women like circumcision, rape, child abuse, physical violence to name but a few she extols at the same moment ways through which women can borrow so as to be treated as fully fledged citizens. Equity between the two sexes is what Nawal advocates; in having that latter woman will earn that respect and consideration which stand as the most important points of female being and essence on earth.

## References

- EL SAADAWI, Nawal, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, London, Zed Books 1977 [2016].
- ....., *Woman at Point Zero*, London, Zed Books 1975 [2008].
- SENE, Abib, “A Gender Sex-System that Afrocentralizes the issue of a Traditional Female Identity. The case in Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* Nuruddin Farah’s *From a Crooked Rib*” *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, (vol 3, issue 5 2020).
- NGOM, Mamadou Abdou Babou, “Polygamy and Male Promiscuity in The official Wife by Mary Karooro Okurut”, *The Journal of African and Postcolonial Studies*, Dakar, Presses Universitaire de Dakar, issue 1, march 2019.
- KANDJI, Fatou Diouf, “Female Sexuality in Buchi Emecheta’s writings” *Bridges, An African Journal of English Studies, Linguistics, Literature, Language and e.s.p, Gender, Sexuality and Literature*, Dakar, Institut Senegalo-Britannique, issue 6, 1995, pp 12-27).
- GUEYE, Mansour, “Women in African Women’s Writings, A study of novels by Buchi Emecheta and Tsitsi Dangaremba” Dakar, 2017.
- DIALLO, Souleymane, “The Psychological Sensualism and the Cognitive Structure of Creativity and Creation in Nawal El Saadawi’s *A Daughter of Isis*”, *Global Journal of Human-Social Science: A Arts and Humanities Psychology*, vol 3, Issue 4, 2021.