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The Pang of Debasement of Female Identity in Nawal El Saadawi's *Women at Point Zero*

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Abstract:

The plight of women in post-colonial Africa is intermingled with abuses and tortures. Women are stifled under the powerful clutches of the male chauvinistic society which crushes her spirits and aspirations. This research article explores Nawal El Saadawi's portrayal of the female protagonist in her novel, "*Women at Point Zero*" (1983). The novel manifests itself as a weapon which attacks the patriarchal male tradition through its protagonist, Firdaus. The novel is a clear portrayal of the futile efforts made by the protagonist to revive her debased female identity and assert her womanhood. She is trampled by men and deprived of her identity at various levels in her life. The patriarchal nature of the society has reduced her into a mere sex toy and a beast of burden. She is baffled by the injustice exhibited towards her and is tossed into a state of psychotic distress. The unextinguishable fire in her and her yearning for self-respect turns her into a victim of death sentence. The crime that she committed was an act of defense and protection of her dignity, which is failed to be realized by the judicial system. The study is an attack on the male domineering African societies and the need to culminate the dehumanizing nature of their culture which has overexploited women by abusing her and traumatizing her physically, sexually and mentally.

Keywords: Culture, Femininity, Identity, Patriarchal, Psychotic.

Introduction

A sharp contrast exists in the discourse of trauma in the field of Medical Sciences, Social Sciences or Humanities and the perceptions are in conflict with one another. Researches in the fields of Psychiatry and Psychoanalysis have aroused questions about the physical and psychological trauma inflicted on human beings which undermines their ability to comprehend or discern what is to be done and not to be done.

Herman (1992) indicates that the victims of extremely painful psychological trauma narrate their stories in a fragmented, contradictory and emotional manner. The traumatic event itself becomes etched in their identity as an openly manifested symptom of their personality. Substantiative references from Freudian 'hysteria' and George Orwell's 'double thinking' and 'medical dissociation', Herman is of the opinion that from a psychological point of view a traumatic experience cannot be conveyed verbally. The Caruthian literary trauma theory was formulated based on the research on victims of sexual and domestic violence and victims of war. According to Bessel Vander Kolk, the victims of trauma lack their ability to correlate and precisely articulate the memory of their traumatic experience. Kolk (2000) associates the memory of the victims of psychological trauma to that of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), wherein the reminiscence of the traumatizing event in the memory of the victim dominates the victim's consciousness. PTSD manifests as antisocial behaviors and violent outbursts in victims of trauma. Based on this research, Caruth is of the view that the agony inflicted by trauma is unexplainable. Caruthian Theory is of the view that the traumatic experience creates a kind of amnesia and dissociates individuals from the practical world.

The victims of trauma often harbour the hangovers of horrific experiences like being subjects of earthquakes, floods, fire, kidnappings and terrorist attacks. These traumatic experiences are reflected as slurred speech, incoherent answers, slowed-down motion and distorted memories in an individual. Literature has the invincible tendency to capture the essence of trauma whereby it analyses the agonizing journey of life through the protagonist's experiences in Nawal El Saadawi's novel, '*Woman at Point Zero*' (1983).

The Impact of Trauma on the Abuse of Women

The subjugation of women by the social and cultural factors has reduced her status in the family and society as a sex toy and a labouring machine. She is abused and oppressed by cultural

and religious nuances. The day-to-day experience of African women is no better than the others and is extremely traumatic. The trauma is registered at every instance in their lives. She is the subject of extremities of cruelties in the world of patriarchal dominance. She is handicapped due to religious hypocrisy, domestic violence, poverty, political injustice and other social factors limiting her potentials as manifested by the protagonist, Firdaus in *Women at Point Zero*

The protagonist in *Women at Point Zero* is portrayed as a woman who is very different from the other women. She deviates from the set norms for a woman as she scares the prison authorities as pointed by the narrator. She generates a sense of respect as one reads her personality. She cares for nothing and wants nothing but holds herself in a very high esteem as one course through the novel. All she wanted was the liberation of women and she tries to achieve it by dying as a martyr. She believes that she would have a chance to live as a free woman on another existence.

Firdaus was never treated as a human being in the world of men and was subjugated and reduced to being a lifeless body throughout her life. She had the privilege of appealing against the hasty court judgement that was passed on her for the murder that she committed, but her pride did not permit her to do so. Instead, she confines herself to an invisible wall that she had constructed which is devoid of men and the other abusers. She stubbornly stays silent and awaits the movement of her execution. She leads the world into a mystery by refusing to talk about herself. She flaunts her silent disposition by living a life of her own terms. She exhibits her defiance towards the world which had been so callous and insensitive towards her by refusing to speak.

Her act of shuttering herself from the normal world, puzzles the readers prompting them to find reasons behind her obstinate resolve to shut off everyone as she was approaching her execution sooner. What was the cruelty imposed on her? What is the reason behind her indifference and defiance? She finally breaks her silence and agrees to talk to the narrator. She reveals the reason behind committing the murder and getting rid of her tormentor. She is pictured as an archetype of a traumatized African woman. There are so many African women who are subject to tortures under the patriarchal and monstrous male society but never get an opportunity to expose to the world who they are? What they are subject to? Many women do not even get a chance to tell their stories as Firdaus does.

The narrator comes to know about Firdaus when she visits the inmates of the Egyptian prisons who were suffering from neurosis. More specifically, Nawal El Saadawi, herself is a psychiatrist visits the prison to treat patients but grows more interested in Firdaus' story. On her meeting with Firdaus, the narrator concludes that Firdaus also was one of the psychiatrically ill patients. According to the narrator, though Firdaus was suffering from psychosis, she was exceptional from other prisoners because of her fearlessness of death and her refusal to live.

The author imprints the opinion that Firdaus is so different from other women as she overcomes those forces that deprive the human beings their right to live and their right to liberty. The novelist reveals the protagonist's psychological condition as:

will never meet anyone like her in or out of prison. She refuses all
visitors and won't speak to anyone. She usually leaves her food untouched
and remains wide awake until dawn (1)

Firdaus was habitually found to sit still, staring vacantly into space for hours which leads the narrator into believing that she was suffering from perennial maniac symptoms. The prison doctor is of the opinion that Firdaus did not commit the murder for which she was about to be executed. The narrator also states that she had never seen a woman who had killed. According to the author's interpretation, women are often observed as subservient and also the receivers of abuses of men. As the protagonist unravels her story, the narrator develops a kind of admiration towards her as she seemed to be so exceptional from the women she had witnessed.

It becomes obvious that a woman's life is always subject to the control of men from her cradle to the grave. The dominant male society subjugates her leaving her at the mercy of her father initially, secondly her uncle, thirdly her husband, then her boss and the male clients. Firdaus is of the opinion that every woman is a kind of prostitute, and the worst paid prostitute is the house wife (76). As a child, she was given reasons by her family to consider her gender as an inferior one. The most shocking fact was that her father displayed negligence towards the agony of Firdaus, her mother and any other female sibling. One such episode of neglect happened when one of her siblings passed away. Her father, 'would eat his supper, my mother would wash his legs, and then he would go to sleep, just as he did every night'. (18) In case if the child lost was a

boy, the father's display of agony would have been totally different that he would have beaten his wife for negligence which led to the boy's death.

After her father's death, her abuse did take a different shape as it got transferred to her uncle who was her new guardian. He took every opportunity to molest her. When his uncle's wife became intolerant of keeping her under their roof, she was sent to a boarding house. She was forced into an early marriage immediately after completion of her secondary education. She also suffered many untold abuses after marriage. As an act of rebellion, she fled from her husband's house as she could not tolerate the physical abuse and hunger at her husband's house. Nowhere but she could seek refuge in her uncle's house but was offered no comfort or assurance. As she narrated how her husband pummelled her, she recalls:

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 her... The precepts of religion permitted such punishment (*Women at Point Zero*, 44).

She had no other option but to go back to her husband who started torturing her in worse ways than before. The tortures continued in worst forms thereafter. Firdaus came to the realization that in order to determine success as a woman, she always in one way or the other had to depend on a man for materializing the success. She wanted to restore her dignity even as a prostitute which she did so by carefully choosing her clients. She always had to count on men for patronage. She was struck by the realization that without the patronage of such disrespectful men, her womanhood would prove to be powerless and vulnerable.

The tribulations suffered by Firdaus bears witness of the state of women in El Saadwi's Egypt. The prolonged incitement leads to the compulsion of exhibiting violent behaviour towards the violators. The narrator finds a justification for the murder committed by the protagonist as she states: 'it looked to me as though this woman who had killed a human being and was shortly to be killed herself was a much better person than I' (3). The novelist indirectly applauds the protagonist for having displayed the kind of courage to kill the man who abused

her. The author points out Firdaus' transcendence above the fear of death, her refusal to deny her crime, her negligence to plea to the court as acts of self-esteem. The desire which was burning in her throughout her life of submissiveness is at last achieved by her.

When Firdaus agrees to meet the narrator in the last few hours before her hanging, the narrator could not contain her excitement. The mindset of the protagonist is revealed as she states that she has not achieved enough for the women folk by killing just one man. She perceives death as a 'journey to a place unknown to everybody on this earth [that] fills me with pride. All my life, I have wanted something that fills me with pride, make me feel superior to everyone else, including kings, princes and rulers' (11). According to her, living in the male dominated world was like dying and dying was like living. Firdaus herself admits that all her life she has 'been searching for something that fills... [her] with pride' (11). Most of her desires as a woman were extinguished and one such was her desire to love and be loved. She reminisces how she was deprived of playing her childhood friend, Muhammadain in the fields. She also recalls the cultural conspiracy that deprived the joy of being a woman. She reminisces the moment on which her genitals were clipped to deny her sexual pleasure because of the cultural and religious constraints of being a promiscuous woman. Even she is denied of her basic right as a human being. She remembers the day when a woman carried a sharp razor blade and inserted it between her thighs and scraped off the skin from her genital. This painful incident haunted her even in her adulthood.

She strongly believed that education can uplift one's life and dreamed of getting admitted in the university in Cairo. Her uncle laughed at her aim and remarked that it was a senseless idea for a woman to cherish such a dream. In another instance, she is also noted to suffer the injustice of denial of her rights to education. She cherished the hopes that education as the most powerful weapon which could make her flap her wings and rise to an elite class in the society. Her dream of going to the university in Cairo gets shattered by her uncle as he laughed at her and thought that it was something of ridicule that a woman could harbour such a dream. As they converse, the uncle asks her what she would like to do in Cairo, Firdaus had replied: "I will go to El-Azhar and study like you". (16). Her uncle's reactions to her reply were very hurtful to her wounded pride as a woman. Her hopes of rising up was suppressed at every level in the society as she thinks: "El Azhar was an awesome world peopled only by men, and my uncle was one of them". (21)

Miss. Iqbal was the only person who was supportive with her ambition but because of the rejection and denial, Firdaus had to move on without further education.

All she has received throughout her life were deprivations and abuses. Finally, realization dawns in her that the handicap laid by the society on most women is that they cannot dream or achieve their dreams. It was always the men who bound her by their shackles of power and decided her existence. She realizes that “all these rulers were men. What they had in common was an avaricious and distorted personality.... I discovered that history tended to repeat itself with a foolish obstinacy”. (27) Especially, life had been too cruel to the African women under the imprisonment of male chauvinism. Her denials and deprivations nurtured Firdaus’ grudge towards the perpetrators of such misery and she was vengeful over men.

She was not like other women to accept her fate and submit to domestic violence. Hence, she takes a moral diversion towards the path of prostitution. Her body became irresistible to the men for which she took the advantage of developing high tastes and a priceless sense of value. She had the independence of choosing her own men to whom she rendered her services as a sex worker. Even though she acquired this kind of self-worth and liberty, she did she get disturbed by pimps who demanded her services to unknown men. Due to her realization of self-worth, she couldn’t yield to imposition of the pimp in her line. She realizes that the pimp was not ready to acknowledge her independence. A scuffled ensued between her and the pimp during which time in order to protect herself, she was forced to kill him. Immediately after killing the pimp, she becomes exhilarated thinking that she was freed from all her male tormentors. While in the prison also, when the death sentence was laid on her, as she stayed awaiting death by hanging, she is excited with the thought that she was free from all male abuse.

The distress that had plagued her throughout her existence as a woman made her put an end to it by murdering the pimp. At times, she was a poor victim of depression which led to an instability in her mental state. She once asked her college tutor, Miss. Iqbal, to let her ventilate her suppressed emotions as she pleaded, “Let me cry”. (29) Her tutor states that she has not witnessed Firdaus cry before. She attributes her outburst to her repressed emotions. “Nothing has happened. Miss. Iqbal does not know what the reason is. Nothing new has happened to me”. (30) As she confesses to the narrator, Firdaus states that she “tried to explain to Miss. Iqbal what had

happened, but if something had happened which I was unable to recall or as if nothing had happened at all". (31)

The entire study focusses on the pathetic condition of women in contemporary Africa. It views the plight of women as a psychosocial tragedy pronounced on them by dehumanizing cultural practices where they are oppressed. In line with the view of Caruth that the victims of psychological trauma suffer a memory by forgetting the horrific experiences they had suffered. Firdaus had been a subject of abuse since childhood and the novelist portrays her personality to be in alignment with Caruth's theoretical personality. The ordeals women go through in Africa are said to bring a serious impact in the society also. The scars inflicted on victims like Firdaus by the unsympathetic and domineering patriarchal society are indelible. The study agrees that Firdaus holds a prestigious acclaim as a woman who had cherished high hopes and has stood ever tall by holding steadfastly her self-worth and independence.

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