

When a Woman Walks the Streets: the Female Challenge to Public Space in Nawal El Saadawi's Novel Woman at Point Zero.

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Abstract

Nawal El Saadawi's novel *Woman at Point Zero* examines a character named Firdaus, a peasant girl who tries to negotiate a role of independence for herself in mid-to-late 20th century Cairo. Briefly forced into a bad marriage, and unable to get a university education along with any sustaining employment, Firdaus resorts to earning her wages as a prostitute, an occupation she ironically comes to admire for the power it gives her over men. Yet her job as a prostitute along with her ongoing attempts to remain independent in a male-dominated world have another unexpected effect. She is forced to renegotiate and challenge a male-defined public space. Along with being a compelling portrait of a woman trying to maintain her independence, *Woman at Point Zero* is also a text that delineates and maps how gender comes in conflict with public space and how gender negotiates and challenges it.

Keywords: Nawal El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero*, Public Space

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Introduction

In Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay, "A Room of One's Own," the author makes a compelling argument of the difficulties women novelists and writers face due to the barriers of their gender. "a woman must have money and a room of her own ... if she is to write fiction" Woolf writes, which "leaves the great problem of the true nature of fiction unsolved" (Woolf 1929). Economically, women face barriers that prevent them from acquiring the writer's studio, a space that a man would have an easier time acquiring as a professor or as a successful businessman. The female artist is also handicapped because of the restraints of the women preceding her. "Certainly our mothers had not provided us with anything comparable to all this—our mothers who found it difficult to scrape together thirty thousand pounds, our mothers who bore thirteen children to ministers of religion at St. Andrews" (Woolf 1929). The private space that a woman writer seeks to locate can only be acquired with great difficulty. Religion, lack of economic opportunity, patriarchal traditions and exclusions, and other factors are some of the challenges that women face as artists. The same barriers that a Western 20th century woman faces in Britain are similar to what an Egyptian woman must contend with in a mid-twentieth century text, *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi. Yet the protagonist of El Saadawi's fictionalized study of a Cairo prostitute faces even more barriers when she tries to transgress the heavily dominated male public space just as a high school student in Egypt's capital city. The protagonist Firdaus may even succeed in earning her own living as an independent prostitute. The success, however, is only temporary. In trying to maintain her independence, she ends up killing a man who tries to force himself on her as her would-be pimp. She will go to prison for this murder where she will be executed. On the eve of her execution, a state-appointed psychiatrist is allowed to interview her. (The female psychiatrist is a stand-in for the author, Nawal El Saadawi). Within the brief time Firdaus has before her execution, she will relate her life of abuse that leads up to such state-sponsored, violent end. Yet does her journey to the gallows also get shaped by her challenges to the male dominated public space of Cairo? By the time Firdaus manages to maintain an unmolested presence in Cairo's streets, she does so as a stranger to her own self. "Had my body changed? Had I been transported into another woman's body? And where had my own, real body, gone?" (El Saadawi 2007 66). *Woman at Point Zero* is also a text where its female protagonist must critically delineate and create a strategy for breaching a space she is not welcome in; similar to what the female novelist must negotiate in Woolf's essay, "A Room of One's Own." When Woolf writes how she "found myself walking with extreme rapidity across a grass plot" where "a man's figure rose to intercept me" she could also be writing about Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero*. Male interception and unfriendly streets will haunt Firdaus throughout her story. Religious traditions and Cairene cultural perceptions regarding women will also present other challenges for El Saadawi's protagonist. Public space will never be easy for Firdaus to negotiate, just like Woolf's fictionalized writer in her essay will not have an easy time getting into the college for scholars where the beadle (security officer) intercepts her.

Body

Born into a village culture, Firdaus seems destined for a life of servitude for a poor peasant family. Her illiterate father values children only for the work they can provide: when a newborn son dies he beats his wife for it (El Saadawi 2007 17). By

the time Firdaus reaches puberty, she is forced to undergo a brutal genital circumcision. After her mother dies, Firdaus is sent to live in Cairo with her Uncle (who has abused her in the village). Even before she departs for Cairo, Firdaus anticipates the education she hopes to receive in that city, noting how she would love to attend El Azhar, an institution of higher education only for men (El Saadawi 2007 14). Once ensconced in her Uncle's home, Firdaus undergoes a brutal domestic regimen where she functions as a servant and also object of her Uncle's sexual attention. Firdaus' only respite is school, a journey that ends with her receiving a secondary school certificate. With no hope for continuing the love of learning that Firdaus has come to embrace, she briefly runs away from her Uncle's house.

Does the village shadow Firdaus? Even if she left it as a young girl, does the peasant culture that circumcised Firdaus continue to dominate her presence in the city? While it may seem to be an extreme connection, the way Firdaus is denied a higher level of education (along with the possibility to live independently without a husband) can also be read as another form of permanent restriction imposed by her village. In Nezar Alsayyad's article "The Fundamentalist City, Medieval Modernity, and the Arab Spring" the author looks at the complex relationship that Islamic Fundamentalism has with Arab cities after the Arab Spring. The author defines such a connection between desert and city as "a core-periphery relationship" (Alsayyad 2012 274). The Fundamentalist view of the desert is as "a space of virtue and purity" while the city "is condemned as a place of vice and infidelity" (Alsayyad 2012 275). The Uncle's household that Firdaus resides in after leaving her village, is not only an extension of the village (down to the sexual enticement the Uncle soon begins to feel for her) but also a barrier against the city that Firdaus' relative perceives to be a potentially evil influence on her. When her uncle visits her in the village, Firdaus expresses a hope to go with him to Cairo and study at the mosque and religious school El Azhar. Initially, her uncle finds this amusing, but after she comes to live with him and his new wife, she begins to stray from the social roles she would be expected to live in the village. While she can attend a secondary school, a university would represent a breach of the village that the uncle is still trying to preserve. "A respected Shiekh and man of religion like myself sending his niece off to mix in the company of men?!" (El Saadawi 2007 37). His next comment may make his religiosity appear hypocritical. "Besides, where will the money come from for her lodging, her books, and clothes?" (El Saadawi 2007 37). Still, the uncle is quick to acquiesce to his wife's idea, that being, to marry her off to an older Shiekh, and in so doing, still preserve the culture of the village, space that is viewed as virtuous and pure. Before Firdaus is forced into such a relationship, however, she will attempt her first flight from the virtuous desert to the vices of the city. For Firdaus, ironically, the values of the desert and village are more filled with vice and corruption, while the genuine vice of the city she will later participate in, will briefly give her some freedom.

Even though she has previously left her Uncle's house, her first deliberate flight from it opens up a range of sensations for her. "When I looked at the streets, it was as though I was seeing them for the first time. A new world was opening up in front of my eyes" Firdaus narrates about her solo voyage through Cairo's streets. (El Saadawi 2007 42). Yet by nightfall, Firdaus discovers how the streets are the domain of men. An unaccompanied young woman can soon become the prey of men, as Firdaus discovers in the penetrating, sexual gaze from one man whose eyes "dropped their gaze with slow intent down to my shoes...then gradually started to climb up my legs,

to my thighs, my belly, my breasts” (El Saadawi 2007 43). The terror that Firdaus undergoes from this predatory gaze anticipates a deranged urban legend that would haunt Cairo’s streets in the early 21st century where a male taxi driver was rumored to kidnap upper middle class women, rape them, and then kill them. While this story proved to be unfounded, the nature of it belied the challenges that Egyptian women would still face in a new century. “As these stories indicate, these women’s public presence was haunted by the specter of prostitution” writes Anouk de Koning in “Gender, Public Space and Social Segregation in Cairo: Of Taxi Drivers, Prostitutes and Professional Women” (de Koning 2009 543). Firdaus aspires to attending a university, but her Aunt forbids it, (fearing the bad influence of male classmates) and as a result, she is married off to an old Shiekh, where her domestic regimen is repeated, though more harshly. When she finally flees her abusive husband, she will soon be forced into a life of prostitution, and later, after an attempt to work a clerical job (where her male employer preys on her) chooses to survive as a prostitute. Does such a life, ironically, help Firdaus to traverse Cairo’s streets more freely? When she leaves her husband with a swollen face from his physical abuse, no one notices her (El Saadawi 2007 47). She only becomes an object of interest to a male who shows her sympathy, but ostensibly as a way to force her into a life of prostitution for him. The streets where she earlier found freedom from an abusive husband only seemed to metaphorically reinforce his abuse. “I was just a pebble thrown into it, battered by the waves, tossed here and there, rolling over and over to be abandoned somewhere on the shore” (El Saadawi 2007 48).

The danger that Firdaus faces during her flight is similar to what Cairene women must contend with in the early 21st century, particularly in the nature of ambling without a specific destination, which is often the plight of Firdaus, fleeing abusive relatives, a husband, and pimps. “Hanging around in the streets, especially on their own, was taken as an open invitation for men to make contact. Indicative of their liminal presence in these kind of public spaces were the efforts of my friends to carefully plan their schedules and meetings to avoid time gaps during which they would have to spend time waiting alone in a public space” writes de Koning (de Koning 2009 547). Unfortunately, Firdaus was not among the middle class which are the women that de Koning describes. Again, much of Firdaus’ experience in traversing Cairo public space is as a refuge of sexual and physical abuse. And once again, ironically (as will be discussed later) it is only when Firdaus chooses to work as a prostitute without a pimp that she will finally find some freedom in a space where she was previously harassed and preyed upon.

The man who initially showed Firdaus sympathy—Bayoumi—will soon become her abusive pimp. Once again, Firdaus will attempt to find freedom in a male dominated public space: the streets of Cairo, and once again, she will become entrapped by the sympathy of another Cairene. This time, however, the sympathetic Egyptian is a woman. The woman she meets is in a neighborhood that appears to be more upper middle class: “It was a clean, paved thoroughfare, which ran along one bank of the Nile with tall trees on either side. The houses were surrounded by fences and gardens” (El Saadawi 2007 54). The upscale neighborhood Firdaus finds herself in is similar to the “Gated communities...in the desert around Cairo” that de Koning describes as initial safe spaces for upper class Egyptian women. The woman that Firdaus meets (and whose name is Sharifa) will soon become her prisoner inside of one of these palatial houses. Sharifa turns out to be another pimp; albeit one who does not

physically abuse Firdaus the way Bayoumi did. Eventually Firdaus realizes how her gilded bedroom is still a bordello and works up the courage to leave it when Sharifa is asleep one night. Initially, the city she flees into at night is devoid of the men who dominate its streets during the day. Despite her imprisonment as a prostitute, Firdaus has become more streetwise—or at least is no longer fearful as a woman walking alone on the streets as she had once been. Her new found freedom, however, is hard for her to grasp. “Had my body changed? Had I been transported into another woman’s body? And where had my own, my real body gone?” (El Saadawi 2007 66). Firdaus’ lack of fear soon puts her in danger when she comes across a policeman. The way she is lightly dressed (and also unaccompanied by a male) encourages the policeman to force her into a sexual act or face an arrest for being a prostitute. He does not pay her, however, after she has sex with him and is cast out into the streets while it is raining. Despite her previous work as a prostitute, she has never personally collected the money exchanged for her sexual services. This will soon change, and when Firdaus finally receives money for her services, it will become an epiphany for her wherein she makes a connection between her village and the city whose streets she now sells her body in.

It is in the next man who comes along—a driver who asks her to take shelter from the rain in his car—that Firdaus connects the vice of the city with the so-called virtue of the desert. (His offer, however, is a veiled invitation to seek out Firdaus’ services as a prostitute.) In the morning after this man pays her, Firdaus grabs the money as if it were a revelation: “The movement of my hand as I clasped the ten pound note solved the enigma in one swift, sweeping movement...” (El Saadawi 2007 68). At that moment, Firdaus has a flashback to when she was a child and first asked her father for a small denomination to buy some candy. The father is slightly incensed that his daughter would ask money from him early in the morning; it is only after she completes some grueling chores around the farm that he will give her a small sum at the end of the day. The freedom she feels from holding that piaster note is no different from the same sensation she feels when the driver gives her a 10-pound note. Firdaus’ piaster “was mine to do with it what I wanted, to buy what I wanted...whether sweets, or carob, or molass sticks” (El Saadawi 2007 70). When Firdaus receives the 10-pound note, it as if she is receiving an epiphany from her childhood that “tore away the shroud that covered up a truth I had in fact experienced when still a child, when for the first time my father gave me...a coin to hold in my hand, and be mine” (El Saadawi 2007 68-69). Whether as a child or as an adult; whether in the virtuous desert or in the corrupt city, a woman will only be viewed for her services, and payment for her services will give her a temporary sense of freedom—or so Firdaus surmises. It is a summation she will hold until she finally kills another male who later becomes her pimp. Yes, she will briefly leave her life as an independent prostitute for a legal job in a store; for which she will soon realize how a legitimate female employee is worse off than a prostitute.

Understandably, the reader will find it hard to sympathize with the notion of prostitution being a profession that allows a woman to feel a strong sense of independence and even liberation. Many critiques and reviews of *Woman at Point Zero* also view the text from this perspective where Firdaus achieves dubious independence as a prostitute. According to one overview of the book, “Saadawi’s story follows one woman pushing against unwanted roles she is repeatedly forced to play within a patriarchal society” ([www. Wmich.edu/dialogues](http://www.Wmich.edu/dialogues)). Yet the money

Firdaus makes from her first act of prostitution without a pimp lets her approach male-dominated public space as a potential challenger and not as the expected submissive victim. The ten-pound note she has received continues to act as a talisman or amulet that can vanquish the predatory nature that Cairo's streets have previously had for her. As she dines by herself in a restaurant after she has left her first independent sex act as a prostitute, she no longer feels the presence and judgment of a public male gaze. "I realized this was the first time in my life I was eating without being watched by two eyes gazing into my plate to see how much food I took" Firdaus observes, and soon attributing this to the recent money she earned. "Was it possible that a mere piece of paper could make such a change?" (El Saadawi 2007 71). As an independent prostitute, Firdaus does not fear the streets of Cairo. Yes, men will challenge her independence, eventually leading to one male who is so incensed about it that he will try to force himself to be her pimp, which leads to her violent, fatal stabbing of him. As a prostitute without a pimp, Firdaus has managed to breach male public space and establish a presence within it. As she observes in a celebratory tone: "I ceased to bend my head or to look away. I walked through the streets with my head held high, and my eyes looking straight ahead" (El Saadawi 2007 73). Firdaus' resolve to live in a role that many would find sad and or repugnant may not garner much reader sympathy. Nevertheless, the way she now freely moves about in a space where she was previously preyed upon, does show an individual agency that she was not psychologically in possession of before. Yet does such resolve force a woman into another unwanted role in a patriarchal society? Or, does her independently controlled prostitution allow her to challenge that patriarchy? Despite such feeling of freedom, Firdaus will leave her profession to work for a few years in a company, during which she will fall in love with a political radical who only uses her as a mistress while he is engaged to another woman, unbeknownst to her. "Ibrahim uses the notion of revolution only as a trick to get her into bed" (www. Wmich.edu.dialogues). The experience makes her bitter, but once again, brings her back to her earlier revelation. "When I was a prostitute I never gave anything for nothing, but always took something in return. But in love I gave my body and my soul...freely" (El Saadawi 2007 93). Arguably, Firdaus comes to this realization after another bitter experience. Unlike her earlier abusive experiences after which she took flight, Firdaus now feels she has a *right* to have a free, unmolested presence in a male-dominated cityscape, whether as prostitute or not. "I was like a woman walking through an enchanted world to which she does not belong. She is free to do what she wants, and free not to do it" (El Saadawi 2007 95).

Inevitably, another man will soon coerce Firdaus into working for him. Unlike her earlier pimp Bayoumi, this man is connected to the courts and police. Despite such high influence, he will not hesitate to physically abuse Firdaus to ensure she not leave him. Firdaus, however, will soon leave him. By this point, she has learned to navigate the streets of Cairo on a relatively equally footing with men. Her fight to establish a presence in male dominated space becomes framed in a power relationship. "I want to be one of the masters and not the slaves" she says to her pimp when he refuses to let her leave his apartment (El Saadawi 2007 103). If Firdaus defines power as a simple, binary relationship, so does her pimp, who reminds her that a woman can never be the master. When Firdaus tries again to get past him, he raises a knife, which she soon commandeers, controls, and quickly uses to kill him. "I was astonished to find how easily my hand moved as I thrust the knife into flesh" (El Saadawi 2007 104).

Firdaus describes her murder of her pimp as an almost out-of-body type experience. What is interesting about this description is how she views herself as an upper class woman. Yet the way she walks along the Nile River is not the way such a woman as she describes, would walk. “But my firm, confident steps resounding on the pavement proved that I was nobody’s wife” (El Saadawi 2007 105). Ironically, Firdaus fails to observe how her well-dressed, upper class nature is itself a provocative presence in public space. As Anouk de Koning observes, upper-class, Western style for Egyptian women may be a sign of elite standing; nevertheless, “it could also be taken to indicate moral and sexual looseness” (de Koning 2009 540). Thus, despite the way Firdaus has had her hair “done by a stylist who catered for the rich” and had her lips “painted in the natural tone preferred by respectable women” a man from a luxurious car offers to pay her for sexual services. The man—an Arab prince—soon apologizes to Firdaus when she throws away the money he has offered to her. ““At first I thought you were a prostitute,”” he explains (El Saadawi 2007 108). The prince’s initial confusion reflects the conclusion that de Koning will later make about Egyptian women navigating Cairene streets in the 21st century, that being, “women’s public presence was haunted by the specter of prostitution” (de Koning 2009 543). In her traversing of mid-20th century Cairo streets, is Firdaus the unacknowledged doppelganger of the 21st century Cairo woman?

Conclusion

When the Arab Spring spread to Egypt, Egyptian women including an almost 90-year old Nawal El Saadawi were there to help foster democracy that took place in Tahir Square, the heart of Cairo. As one women protestor noted: ““We are here as women, but we are speaking out for everyone”” (Rubin 2011 66). Among those women was Saadawi, whose “energy is still astonishing” and who felt emboldened enough to strike back at the cavalry that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak assembled to charge and disperse the pro-democracy crowds at Tahir Square (Rubin 2011 67). Yet in the same article that praises El Saadawi, it also concludes that “she is still a part of yesterday’s Egypt” despite the respect many Egyptian women now give her (Rubin 2011 67). Still, the crowds that assembled at Tahir Square was a controlled space; the same article that praises and then dismisses El Saadawi notes how men formed a protective cordon around the women who were part of the pro-democracy demonstration. Similar to the prostitute El Saadawi wrote about almost 40 years before, Egyptian women still seem to be battling to establish a more independent presence for themselves in what is still a primarily male-documented public space. If women in the West, however, have more freedom to traverse the capital cities and major cultural centers than their Egyptian counterparts, are they able to enter and maintain a presence in the academic, cultural, financial and other centers of power, as Virginia Woolf raises in her almost 100-year old essay, “A Room of One’s Own?” As Woolf observes early in her essay, a woman must have her own space to write for which she will also need remuneration to maintain such a space. In a similar vein, a woman will need to have free access to public space to pursue such creativity. Firdaus never spoke of writing, only how the 10-pound Egyptian note briefly gave her a sense of freedom. Yet like Woolf’s fictional writer in her essay, Firdaus will never have an easy time breaking through the barriers that frequently challenge her pursuit of independence in Cairo. Still, she will challenge them, as a new generation of Egyptian women did not that long ago in Tahir Square.

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