

The Voice of Resistance: Subaltern Voice, Embodied Defiance, and Feminist Consciousness in *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi

Subhash Chandra Bose Y

Assistant Professor, Department of English, AJK College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore, India
Corresponding Author: appunairkutty44@gmail.com

Abstract — This paper presents an advanced feminist and postcolonial analysis of *Woman at Point Zero* (1975) by Nawal El Saadawi, examining the text through the intersecting lenses of feminist waves, existentialism, and contemporary feminist theory. The narrative of Firdaus, a woman sentenced to death, is interpreted as a radical articulation of resistance that challenges the epistemological, social, and institutional foundations of patriarchy. Moving beyond conventional feminist readings, this study incorporates the theoretical contributions of Judith Butler, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and bell hooks to explore issues of performativity, subalternity, and intersectionality. The paper argues that Saadawi reconstructs the notion of freedom as an existential awakening achieved through resistance to both external domination and internalized oppression. Ultimately, *Woman at Point Zero* is positioned as a transformative feminist text that not only critiques patriarchal systems but also redefines the possibilities of agency, voice, and liberation in a global context.

Keywords — Nawal El Saadawi; Feminist Theory; Postcolonial Feminism; Intersectionality; Subaltern Voice; Gender Performativity; Resistance; Patriarchy; Existential Freedom; Women's Writing.

1. Introduction

The emergence of feminist literature as a critical force in global discourse has enabled a re-examination of power structures that regulate gendered identities. Within this context, the works of Nawal El Saadawi occupy a unique and influential position. Writing from within an Egyptian socio-political framework, Saadawi confronts the lived realities of women who exist at the margins of power.

Woman at Point Zero is not merely a literary text but a socio-political intervention that destabilizes dominant narratives of gender, morality, and justice. The protagonist Firdaus, whose life story unfolds through a confessional narrative, represents a subject who transitions from silence to articulation, from victimhood to resistance.

This paper seeks to examine how Saadawi reconfigures feminist consciousness by engaging with multiple theoretical traditions. By situating the novel within the trajectory of feminist waves and integrating poststructuralist and postcolonial insights, the study aims to demonstrate how Firdaus's narrative challenges and expands existing frameworks of feminist thought.

2. Review of Literature

Feminist theory has evolved through multiple stages, each addressing different dimensions of women's oppression. Early frameworks, such as those proposed by Simone de Beauvoir, conceptualized woman as a socially constructed "Other." This notion is central to understanding Firdaus's marginalization. Kate Millett further developed

the idea of patriarchy as a political institution, emphasizing the systemic nature of gender inequality. Meanwhile, Virginia Woolf and Elaine Showalter contributed to the development of feminist literary criticism by advocating for women's intellectual and creative autonomy.

However, later theorists introduced more complex frameworks. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity challenges essentialist notions of identity, suggesting that gender is constructed through repeated acts. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak interrogates the possibility of subaltern speech, raising critical questions about representation and voice. bell hooks emphasizes intersectionality, highlighting the interconnected nature of race, class, and gender.

Saadawi's work intersects with these theoretical perspectives while also offering a distinct postcolonial feminist critique.

3. Feminist Waves Revisited: A Dynamic Framework

From Legal Recognition to Structural Critique - First-wave feminism's focus on legal rights is insufficient in addressing the complexities of Firdaus's oppression. Her life demonstrates that systemic inequality persists despite formal recognition.

The Political Nature of Experience - Second-wave feminism's emphasis on lived experience finds a powerful expression in Firdaus's narrative. Her personal suffering becomes a lens through which broader power structures are revealed.

Intersectionality and Cultural Specificity - Third-wave feminism's focus on diversity is reflected in Saadawi's portrayal of a culturally specific yet universally resonant experience.

Contemporary Resonances - Fourth-wave feminism's focus on voice and resistance is anticipated in Firdaus's refusal to remain silent.

4. Reconstructing the Feminist Subject

4.1 Gender Performativity and Identity

Drawing on Judith Butler, Firdaus's identity can be understood as shaped by repeated social performances imposed by patriarchal norms. Her eventual rejection of these roles represents a disruption of gendered expectations.

4.2 The Subaltern Voice

Through the lens of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Firdaus's narrative challenges the notion that the subaltern cannot speak. While she is structurally marginalized, her testimony becomes a powerful act of articulation that resists erasure.

4.3 Intersectionality and Structural Oppression

Bell hooks's framework highlights how Firdaus's oppression is shaped by multiple intersecting factors. Her experiences cannot be reduced to gender alone but must be understood within a broader socio-economic context.

5. The Ethics of Resistance

Firdaus's actions raise complex ethical questions about violence, justice, and autonomy. Her refusal to seek pardon represents a rejection of the system that condemned her.

Resistance, in this context, is not merely oppositional but transformative. It involves a redefinition of selfhood and a refusal to accept imposed identities.

6. Language, Silence and Power

Language plays a crucial role in the novel's construction of meaning. Firdaus's narrative disrupts the silence imposed upon her, transforming speech into a form of resistance. At the same time, the text acknowledges the limitations of language in fully capturing lived experience, highlighting the tension between expression and erasure.

7. Expanded Findings

- Saadawi transcends Western feminist frameworks by incorporating postcolonial realities
- The novel redefines resistance as an existential and ethical act
- Firdaus embodies both subalternity and agency
- Gender is exposed as a socially constructed and enforced identity
- Intersectionality is central to understanding oppression

8. Conclusion

Woman at Point Zero represents a profound reimagining of feminist resistance. Through Firdaus's journey, Nawal El Saadawi challenges the structures that define and constrain women's lives. By engaging with theorists such as Judith Butler, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and bell hooks, the novel expands the boundaries of feminist thought, offering a vision of liberation that is both radical and deeply human.

Firdaus's voice ultimately becomes a testament to the enduring power of resistance—a reminder that even in the face of systemic oppression, the assertion of selfhood remains a transformative act.

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