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Nawal El Saadawi: Attaining Catharsis through Trauma Narration in *Woman at Point Zero*

By Chitra Susan Thampy¹

Abstract

Nawal El Saadawi is a prolific writer who has received both praise and criticism for her focus on women's victimization and exploitation in patriarchal Muslim cultures. Her works are living testaments to her crusade against repression, inequality, and injustice meted out by the patriarchy. Amidst her efforts to bring about change in the status of women in Egypt she faced a lot of criticism, particularly during Anwar Sadat's rule when she established The Arab Women's Solidarity Association which was later banned in 1991. Feminism is a controversial and challenging subject to address in the Islamic world partly owing to it being a concept of the Western world imposed upon the Middle East and North Africa by imperialism. El Saadawi faced strong backlash from Egyptian society for the publication of her feminist work *Women and Sex* (1972) due to rising religious fundamentalism within the state.

The paper attempts to study the various efforts for women's empowerment in Egypt set forth by the Egyptian writer and feminist Nawal El Saadawi through analyzing her work of creative non-fiction *Woman at Point Zero* (1973) particularly when it comes to trauma narration and scriptotherapy². The protagonist, Firdaus, attains catharsis by reiterating the horrific incidents in her life to Saadawi before walking to the gallows for her execution. This paper argues that writing about Firdaus was a form of scriptotherapy for El Saadawi who fought openly and courageously against patriarchy. I advance the argument that the retelling of the tale of Firdaus offers the possibility of healing both to the author and her audience in the face of patriarchy and the forms of injustices perpetrated by the Egyptian Islamic community. I place special emphasis on scriptotherapy arguing that after the onslaught of criticism El Saadawi received in the aftermath of the publication of *Woman at Point Zero* she increased her productivity, indicating the importance of writing as a weapon against the injustices meted out to voiceless women and men of Egypt.

Keywords: Trauma, Catharsis, Scriptotherapy, Religious orthodoxy, Victimization of women, Patriarchal Muslim cultures

An Era of Political Unrest: Contextualizing Nawal El Saadawi

Nawal El Saadawi (1931-2021) was a prolific Egyptian writer who lived through five wars in Egypt between 1948-1973 and vehemently fought against all forms of injustices, inequalities, and oppression perpetrated by Islam, the West, and other forces. She was studying

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² Scriptotherapy, is a term coined by Suzzette A. Henke in her book *Shattered Subjects* (1998). It is a space where the writer explores his/her writing for therapeutic purposes.

medicine in Egypt in 1951 when the country was overwrought with political events and demonstrations. According to El Saadawi, “At the end of 1951, the Egyptian people were living under a corrupt system headed by King Farouk” (*Walking Through Fire*: 45). The situation was aggravated by the British colonialists secretly controlling the nation. The Wafdist government was in power during this time, headed by Mostafa Al-Nahas Pasha. The Wafdist government adopted a staunchly nationalist and anti-imperialist agenda, and its main aim to overthrow King Farouk and the British occupation of the country. In October 1951, the Wafdist government abolished the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty which ordered the remaining British troops in the Suez Canal that had been posted there since the declaration of the treaty in 1936 to leave Egypt. As a result, this period saw a series of demonstrations against the British occupation forces. Al-Nahas Pasha encouraged popular resistance against the British and secretly armed guerrilla fighters called ‘fida’iyeen’ to operate in the Canal Zone.

The University students were very much involved in the revolution. As a result, many young men left their studies and homes behind to join the revolution and fight against British colonialism. Being a supporter of the Wafdist government, El Saadawi too had wished to take up arms and fight against the British but, being a woman, she was not allowed to go to the war front. Her interest in the revolution made her an active participant in the anti-colonialist demonstrations in her college where all the other members were men. She used to write in magazines published by the college students (35). On January 26, 1952, the city of Cairo was engulfed in flames³, and King Farouk dismissed Prime Minister Nahas Pasha and the Wafdist government from power. In her autobiography *Walking Through Fire*, El Saadawi calls King Farouk a “...corrupt, licentious assassin”, and states that since he was put on the throne at his young age, he was “...quickly surrounded by the three forces that wielded power, namely, the court, the British and Al-Azhar, by the three men who embodied these forces: Ahmed Hassanein, Ali Maher, and Sheikh Al-Maraghi” (64).

Within months, the Wafdist government headed by Muhammed Naguib and Gamal Abd Al-Nasser hit back, and King Farouk had to give up his power and leave the country for good. With the Wafdist government back in power, the Pashas and landlords gathered around Muhammad Naguib, claiming they aimed to defend democracy, freedom, and the right to form political parties. Despite disagreements amongst themselves, the Wafd, the Muslim Brothers, and the Communists united. Both El Saadawi and her father, who participated in the revolution of 1919, trusted the government under Al-Nasser, as her father stated “(Al-Nasser) is a nationalist who believes in independence and has refused to join any alliance or pact, and he will never allow the imperialists into our country, whether Russian or otherwise” (77). Al-Nasser had followed a policy that closed the gap between the very poor and very rich in society, but all of this was toppled over with the coming of Anwar Sadat whom El Saadawi detested. Despite this, El Saadawi did not wholeheartedly support any leader. This is because, in her view every leader in one manner or another suppressed people: “Al-Nasser’s administrative machinery suppressed everything and everybody who did not exhibit total obedience to his system” (283). Censorship was imposed on books, films, and newspapers; as a result, her work *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* was banned.

On July 23, 1956, Al-Nasser announced the nationalization of the Suez Canal, and the ship ‘Ivan Gibb’ left the port of Suez carrying the last contingent of British troops. This was a

³ The Cairo Fire of 1952 or Black Saturday was a series of riots that ensued the killing of 50 Egyptian auxiliary policemen by British occupation troops. The anti-British crowd looted and burned about 750 buildings and the country’s Opera House in downtown Cairo. This mass rebellion resulted in the forced abdication of King Farouk.

very happy period in Egypt, but it was short-lived; within four months the Tripartite Invasion of Egypt took place. On October 29, 1956, the armed forces of England, France, and Israel attacked Egypt by air, land, and sea. During this time, El Saadawi was posted as a doctor in one of the rural health units in Kafr Tahla. Though she could not actively participate in the revolutions, she did her part by attending to casualties in rural areas and the Canal war zone. She was very much disappointed by how the guerrilla fighters, who risked their lives for the freedom of their country, were treated. After making use of such guerrilla fighters during each revolution, at the end of it all, they were suppressed and sought-after like criminals by the Egyptian government and as terrorists by the British.

El Saadawi scathingly remarks on how leaders, particularly in Egypt, often stand on the podium preaching to their supporters with the photo of their supreme ruler in a golden frame behind their heads. Their blind devotion to the supreme leader, as portrayed in her novels such as *The Fall of the Imam*, is also seen in her autobiography, *Walking through Fire*, when she says:

As the years go by the picture in the gilt frame keeps changing as one ruler replaces another. There it hangs high over the head of one man after the other, over the heads of men who bow down before it as though worshipping a pagan god, who speak in low tones lest the man in the picture hear what they say, shoot quick glances at it as though he is watching them as they move around, imitate the way he walks, the way he talks, his voice, his gestures (90).

On November 7, 1956, the UN announced a ceasefire. This led to the withdrawal of England, France, and Israel from Egypt as the Soviet Union had threatened to bombard London and Paris. The period of unrest came over Egypt when Sadat came to power and inaugurated the Open-Door Policy in 1974. This caused Egypt to become a land ruled by a shrinking minority of rich people, and the gap between the rich and the poor started to widen rapidly. In protest, Nawal El Saadawi wrote an article in the newspaper *Al-Shaab*, published by the Socialist Party workers, titled “Who creates Political Parties in Egypt? The People or the Ruler?” This led to her arrest and imprisonment in Al-Kanatir women’s prison on September 6, 1981. The accusation leveled on El Saadawi was that she had conspired with Bulgaria to overthrow the regime. In 1982, after the assassination of Anwar Sadat, she was released from prison.

In June 1992, her name was among the names of writers, poets, historians, and philosophers who were listed on the death list that the conservative Islamist groups put up. She was ordered to be killed at first sight as her novels contained statements that went against Muslim beliefs. According to the Islamists, she was a “heretic” and “the enemy of Allah” (20). During this time, she was writing her novel *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* in which she names oil as the sole reason for the Gulf war of January 1991.

All of these factors influenced her writings, and this influence can be seen particularly in the portrayals of the leaders in her novels, who make rules according to their own whims and oppress those who fight against them. The women characters, particularly in *The Fall of the Imam* and *The Innocence of the Devil*, run away—like Bint Allah—and become imprisoned in their own country—like Ganat. It is possible that El Saadawi might have been representing herself and her own experiences in these characters as she often voiced her protests and concerns. Nawal El Saadawi has written many works, published articles, and founded organizations for women. Her work, *Women and Sex* (1972) produced a strong backlash in Egyptian society due to the

rising religious fundamentalism within the state. The publication of the book was symbolic of the re-emergence and radicalization of the movement.

The turn of the 20th century saw women coming to the forefront of society with various movements in which women fought for their own country and rights. This national consciousness came into being with the 1919 Revolution brought on by England's repression of Egypt's attempts to establish a national economy. Open political agitation and activism from women started with their participation in the Nationalist movement against the British. This period witnessed the emergence of the first phase of Egyptian feminism with women staging strikes, demonstrations, and conducting boycotts.

The first phase of the feminist movement is considered to have taken place between 1923 and 1939 with the founding of the Egyptian Feminist Union. In 1920, Huda Sha'rawi was elected head of Al-Wafd central Women's Committee under the leadership of Saad Zaghloul. Huda Sha'rawi (1879-1947) along with Saiza Nabarawi founded Al-Ittihad Al-Nisa'i Al-Misri, also known as the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU), and it was considered the first feminist organization in Egypt; it was established on March 16, 1923. EFU was characterized by social activism in which the activists, angered by the constitution for not granting women the right to vote, picketed the 1924 opening of the Egyptian parliament. They also concentrated on educational opportunities and reform of marriage laws.

El Saadawi describes EFU as "an upper-class organization that represents the interests of women from the elite and knows nothing about the condition of the working-class women" (El-Halawany, 2002). In 1982, she established The Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA) which was banned in 1991, and due to her unfavorable stance during Anwar Sadat's rule, her article *Al Noon* was also discontinued by the government. El Saadawi represents an untiring voice in women's fight for emancipation in Egypt.

Woman at Point Zero: Voicing the Appalling through Trauma Narration

Firdaus, 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, *Woman at Point Zero* xii)

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In the Author's Preface to the novel *Woman at Point Zero*, El Saadawi states that in 1973, she chanced upon a special permit to visit the Qanatir Prison as a psychiatrist. Overwhelmed by the gloom of the sullen prison buildings and the harshness of the surroundings, El Saadawi was anxious to meet a woman who had "killed a man and was under sentence of death by hanging". She writes, "I had never seen a woman who had killed" (Author's Preface x). El Saadawi admired that this woman had the courage to kill a man who had wronged her.

Firdaus had suffered from a life of poverty, violence, sexual assault, compelled teenage marriage, and prostitution. She was forced to be submissive her entire life. She was married off

at the age of 19, against her wishes, to an old man named Sheikh Mahmoud; she had to endure physical abuse out of her duty to be an obedient wife as advised by her aunt; “A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience” (Saadawi 47). The moment she understood that she could not tolerate the violence, she ran away into the street and found refuge in a man named Bayoumi who offered her a place to stay and promised to find her a job. But she later finds that the streets are safer than people when she is sexually assaulted by Bayoumi and his friends; “For the street had become the only safe place in which I could seek refuge, and into which I could escape with my whole being” (54).

Her life takes a turn when she happens to meet a very confident woman named Sharifa Salah el Dine who teaches her that the worth of a woman is determined by herself and not the men around her. She advises her to become hardened as those who are naïve do not survive. She takes Firdaus as her apprentice and promises her a better life. But again, Firdaus is cheated by Sharifa; she sells Firdaus, and again she is forced to take refuge in the streets. But this endless running makes her stronger and helps her understand life better. Firdaus emerges like metal out of the furnace and becomes a woman who sets a high value on her body.

For many years she lives richly as a prostitute, but she then leaves it behind to become a full-time employee at a workplace as it is a more “respectable job”. There, she realizes that women employees must physically please the higher authorities to maintain their jobs. Firdaus understands how society secretly misuses the term “respectable” for their benefit:

After I had spent three years in the company, I realized that as a prostitute I had been looked upon with more respect and been valued more highly than all the female employees, myself included. An employee is scared of losing her job and becoming a prostitute because she does not understand that the prostitute’s life is, in fact, better than her’s. (81, 82).

Firdaus leaves her seemingly “respectable” job and goes back to prostitution since in this way she can at least set a price for her own body and deny men she doesn’t prefer. She finds this far better than living with a man who doesn’t value her or her body:

All women are victims of deception. Men impose deception on women and punish them for being deceived, force them down to the lowest level and punish them for falling so low, bind them in marriage and then chastise them with menial service for life, or insults or blows. Now I realized that the least deluded of all women was the prostitute. That marriage was the system built on the most cruel suffering for women. (94)

The song that Firdaus sings reflects the freedom that she attains in her life when she opts out of gratifying society; “I hope for nothing, I want for nothing, I fear nothing, I am free” (95).

Firdaus realizes that a woman cannot nurture hope and aspirations, the qualities that result in their freedom of thought, as this challenges men. Men prefer women to be submissive to them, existing as entities devoid of freedom, existing to please them and look after household chores. The truth is that men turned her into a prostitute and then punished her for being one. This enrages her and leads her to kill her pimp Marzouk and tear apart the money that was offered to her by a prince. This self-realization of hers is depicted in her words to the police and

the government as they drag her into prison: “Everybody has to die. I prefer to die for a crime I have committed rather than to die for one of the crimes which you have committed” (111).

The process of narrating trauma allows the author to voice that which cannot be uttered. This narration of an unutterable tale of pain and suffering of transgression or victimization in a medium that can be addressed to everyone enables catharsis. Fragmented memories and repressed trauma can move from the regions of the unconscious into the conscious and the testimony made help bring about catharsis. Catharsis, thus obtained, works as a catalyst of self-actualization towards the wellbeing and healing of the writer. Catharsis propelled Nawal El Saadawi to bravely face negative criticisms and repercussions from the Egyptian government due to her ensuing literary outburst in the following years.

Conclusion

Scriptotherapy, as noted above, is the name coined by Suzzette A. Henke in her book *Shattered Subjects* (1998), as a space where the writer explores his/her writing for therapeutic purposes. Judith Herman, a psychiatrist at Harvard who works with trauma victims, affirms that writing about trauma can reconfigure the trauma victim’s memory of the event, and with this transformation of memory comes the relief of many of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Writing serves as a technique in the course of recovery.

Firdaus puts up a defense mechanism to minimize her inner conflicts and to free herself from the anxiousness of impending death. Firdaus adopts this mannerism to suppress sentiments of stress, anxiety, and conflict within herself. Through narrating the life story of a woman with a strong mind and principles, Nawal El Saadawi could attain self-liberation from the traumas that she herself faced from the Egyptian government. Nawal El Saadawi was a prolific writer who put forward the message of resistance to her readers, and the creative non-fiction *Woman At Point Zero* helped liberate the author to fight against patriarchy in the future.

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