

HANGOVERS OF FEMALE ABUSE: A FEMINIST DISCOURSE OF NAWAL EL SAADAWI'S *WOMAN AT POINT ZERO*

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Abstract

The location of the woman in post colonial Africa is littered with numerous uncertainties and abuses. Just as her culture subjects her unduly to the caprices of domineering male elements, suffocating foreign influences often situate her disadvantageously as the other being. Engaging Joshua Pederson's radical interpretation of trauma and T. Ritu's reflections on postcolonial feminism, this study examines Nawal El Saadawi's portrayal of the female protagonist in the novel, *Woman at Point Zero* (1983) as a marginalized individual who launches a fierce attack against the patriarchal tradition that had persistently debased her female identity. It takes an expository look at the futile efforts made by the protagonist to redeem herself from social oppressions and assert her femininity. Instead of triumphing over the vicissitudes of patriarchy, she is hurled down the social ladder to a zero ebb where she is reduced to a 'beast' of burden and a sex slave. With this, she drifts to the precipice of psychotic dysfunction, spurns the usual yearning for social respect and transmutes literally into an unapproachable enigma who defies the death sentence that was hurriedly passed on her in an unjust judicial pronouncement. The study examines how the narrative uses Firdaus' new location to chart a pathway for the restoration of her female dignity. Her impending execution in the hand of the hangman is revealed as the anticipated climax of the injustice suffered by women because the crime that she is purported to have committed is an undoubted act for the defence and preservation of her female dignity. The study therefore indicates the need for African indigeneous societies to remove the dehumanizing aspects of their cultures that have, over time abused and exploited women and other vulnerable groups.

Keywords: Culture, Femininity, Identity, Patriachal, Psychotic

1. INTRODUCTION

The discourse of trauma as an on-going conversation, whether in the medical sciences, social sciences or the humanities, continues to hypothesize standpoints that are frequently in conflict with one another. The first wave of trauma theorists had relied heavily on researches in the fields of medical psychiatry and literary psychoanalysis to address existential questions about the unnerving tragedies that undermine man's aspiration to make meaning in his disturbed universe. Caruth (1996) as a prominent voice in this consciousness shows evidences of this concern in her work. Also, in a discussion aimed at examining the

available views on the subject of literary and scientific trauma, Pederson (2014) stresses the fact that Caruth had actually built her theory on the works of prominent contemporary psychologists and psychiatrists, most prominent among whom are Judith Herman and Bessel Vander Kolk.

According to Herman (1992), people who have survived extremely painful moments usually tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner. This manifestation underlies their authority and thereby serves the twin purpose of truth-telling and confidentiality. The story of the traumatic event therefore surfaces not only as a verbal narrative, but as a symptom. Making corroborative references to George Orwell's 'double thinking' and 'medical dissociation', as well as Freudian 'hysteria', Herman also wrote from a psychological stand-point to drive home the conviction that it is difficult to convey the experience of trauma verbally.

As we consider Herman's book, which is the outcome of two decades of clinical and empirical research into the experiences of victims of sexual and domestic violence as well as the ordeals of war veterans and victims of political terror, it is reasonable to conclude that it is a valid ground on which Caruthian literary trauma theory was formulated. On the first count, it is heavily influenced by the submissions of Bessel Vander Kolk, whose voluminous works on the subject resonate with the conviction that victims of trauma may sometimes be unable to 'precisely articulate' the memory of their traumatic experience. Kolk (2000) is notably associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a mental condition in which the memory of an unpleasant event dominates the victim's consciousness. This disorder is responsible for violent reactions and antisocial behaviours among trauma victims. It is in consonance with these positions that Caruth puts forward the view that the experience of trauma is unspeakable. Accordingly, the phenomenon is revealed as a reality which impact is undergirded by its lack of signature. Caruthian thesis therefore maintains that the peculiar features of trauma as an 'unspeakable' experience lack registration evidencing in a kind of amnesia and is dissociated from the empirical world.

Pederson (2014: 335) states that as far as Caruth is concerned, 'trauma is an experience so intensely painful to the degree that the mind is unable to process it normally. In the immediate aftermath, the victim may totally forget the event, and if memories of trauma actually return, they are often nonverbal and the victim may be unable to describe them with words'. Whereas contemporary trauma theorists challenge the notion of 'unspeakability' of trauma, tragic incidents are traumatic only to the extent that they exceed the full grip of recollection and vocalization. McNally (2003) for instance, did argue that trauma is memorable and describable, but he nonetheless agreed with classical trauma theorists who argue that memory may be so aching sometimes to the degree that victims may prefer not to speak about it. In their effort to recall the moment, the traumatized may even choose to out rightly forget specific incidents. In results gathered from a clinical investigation, McNally shows that in spite of the fact that victims may remember and may indeed be capable of describing their traumatic experiences, they often choose to repress them from time to time.

The thriving debate on trauma notwithstanding, convergences are often observed from the conflicting notions about the nature and prominent characteristics of the phenomenon. They are hangovers of remarkably unpleasant experiences which may be dreadful realities like earthquakes, floods, fire disasters, terrorist attacks and kidnappings. People who come out of such experiences may begin to see the world as is usually seen in a dream where speech is slurred or incoherent and motion is suspended or slowed down. This peritraumatic reality in psychological terms, is described as 'dissociative alteration in consciousness' where time may seem to slow down, and the traumatized may slip outside of his or her body and exhibit distorted memories (McNally: 182).

Caruth and McNally corroborate each other on the notion that fiction helps to capture the essence of trauma. The former argues that 'imaginative literature or – figural rather than literal language can speak trauma' (Pederson: 334). She also maintains that literature presents a more valid means of representing and discussing the depth of traumatic experiences and consequences than other fields are capable of doing. Whether as a result of a deliberate refusal to verbalize trauma, a psychological inability to do so, or amnesia, the experience of a traumatized person may never be fully appreciated, recorded or recounted as creditably as is done in literature. Meanwhile, Pederson (2000: 340) cautions critics who wish to seek trauma in literature to attune themselves to evocations of confusions, shift in place and time, out of the body experiences, general sense of unreality, and warped memory. All these enable literature to capture the essence and effect of trauma. It is against this background that this exposition analyzes the experiences of the protagonist of Nawal El Saadawi's novel, *Woman at Point Zero* (1983) as a traumatized person. It engages Pederson's radical interpretation of trauma and Ritu's reflections of postcolonial feminism as theoretical frameworks.

2. TEXTUAL DISCUSSION

2.1 On Female Abuse and the Aftermath

We now review the handicap of trauma theory to identify the aftermath of colonial subjugation as traumatic reality. It is essential to note that the experience is constituted in the entrenchment of a patriarchal order which is etched in the every-day experience of the African woman in the epoch of the postcolony. The woman is featured as a person who is constantly oppressed by the social and cultural institutions that have persistently reduced her status and her selfhood to that of a 'mere' creature who is by default situated as the 'other' being.

The woman, both during the epochs of colonialism and the postcolonialism suffers doubly, first as a subjugated colonial citizen, then as a woman who is repressed and abused by cultural and religious nuances. Spivak (2003) reveals the dynamics of power relations which also exhibits concerns on gender inequalities that describe the female in a postcolonial state as a person 'who is even more deeply in the shadow' (287). Arguably, the context of the everyday experience of the African woman continues to be profoundly traumatic. As stated earlier, it is not only during wars, or in mind-bugling massacres or in the event of natural disasters that trauma is registered for the African woman. It is revealed in her customary exposure to the cruelties that characterize her life in a patriarchal world. As the experiences of Firdaus, the protagonist in *Woman at Point Zero* demonstrate, the woman is bred in a world where religious hypocrisy, domestic violence, poverty, social injustice, political instability and other manifestations of indignities limit her potentials.

By defining the sphere of post-colonial feminism therefore, we adopt the submission of Ritu (2014) which is primarily concerned with the representation of women in former colonised societies and western locations. Our interest is on the construction of gender dichotomy in colonial and anti-colonial discourses and representation of women with particular reference to the works of writers that are women. Postcolonial feminist critics often raise a number of conceptual, methodological and political problems implicated in the study of gender characterization. In Ritu's view, while the postcolonial theorist struggles generally against the colonial discourse that aims at misrepresenting the colonial subject as inferior, the task of a postcolonial feminist is far more complicated because she represents the fate of a woman who suffers from the pain of 'double colonization'. The woman in this milieu has to resist the aftermath of colonialism not only as a colonised subject, but also as a woman in perpetual subjugation in a male-dominated society (Ritu: 46).

The appearance of the protagonist in *Woman at Point Zero*, reveals her as a person so different from everybody else. She is so out of the ordinary to the dimension of the surreal as she scares everyone including the prison warders and the narrator. Other characters hold her in awe and even the reader the reader can readily observe the frequent metamorphosis in her character roles, that keep floundering from one state of uncertainty to another until she hits rock bottom. In spite of the fact that Firdaus cares for nothing and wants nothing, she maintains a high impression of herself. This is because all that she had ever wanted was about to happen to her, as she is confident that once she dies as a martyr in the fight for the liberation of women, she believes that she will have another chance to start living anew as a free woman on another existential plane.

Casting a keen look at Firdaus, we will observe that she has always been dead in a man's world, figuratively speaking, living as a sub-human her entire life. Even though she has the option of pleading for leniency or appealing against the hurried court judgement that was passed on her for the murder that she committed, she refuses to do so. Instead, she constructs an invisible wall by which she separates herself from the world that is dominated by men and other colluding abusers. She achieves this through the display of an unnerving code of silence and waits pensively for the moment of her inevitable execution in the hand of the hangman. Taking her time to savour her golden moment of living her life on her own terms, she flaunts her impertinence as she discovers that her life has ultimately become an enigma to the world that had been so callous and disrespectful to her.

We are puzzled to inquire into the reasons behind Firdaus' obstinate resolve to fence off everyone during the late moments preceding the time of her execution. What has happened to her? Why is she so indifferent and defiant now? These are the perplexing realities that remain unresolved until the moment that she finally agrees to have a conversation with the narrator. She unveils the tortured life that she had been exposed to before the climactic episode of her murdering her tormentor. As Firdaus is featured as an archetype of the traumatized African woman, the events that climaxed to her psychotic state are the so-called normal occurrences in the life of an average postcolonial woman. Her narrative is nonetheless featured as the story

of a real woman, like many other real women who die every day from a similar fate. The difference though is that they never get the chance to tell their stories or fight back as Firdaus has done.

In the first instance, it is the narrator's benign acquaintance with inmates that were suffering from neurosis in Egyptian prisons that brings her in direct contact with Firdaus. Coincidentally, El Saadawi the novelist herself who is a psychiatrist in real life appears in the novel only to leave the reader in the confusion of trying to ascertain what her exact role in the novel is all about. During her interview with Firdaus, the narrator comes under the impression that the convicted Firdaus is another inmate afflicted with a mental condition. Even though she finally diagnoses her as a woman living in a psychotic state, she marks her out as an exceptional person who stood tall among others (El Saadawi: iii), admitting that the uniqueness of Firdaus among the inmates is about 'her absolute refusal to live, her absolute fearlessness of death' more than anything else. Accordingly, Firdaus as 'a woman driven by despair to the darkest of ends' (iii), is not that unique. Yet unlike others, her experience drives her, not just to an end, but to such extremities that bear the tell-tale of a woman who has been subjected to uncanny female abuse. The consequence of this is the traumatic hangover that changes her demeanour as she is determined on the destructive path of self-immolation.

Through the narrative, El Saadawi submits that there is the need for Firdaus to 'challenge and to overcome those forces that deprive human beings their right to live, love and real freedom' (iv). In furtherance of revealing Firdaus' psychological condition, she states that one

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).

The prison warden's observation that Firdaus habitually sits still, staring vacantly into space for hours tallies with the narrator's psychoanalytical reading which devotes a significant part of the narration to the inscribing the character as an unusual being who perennially exhibits maniac symptoms. Her refusal to attend counselling sessions with the visiting psychiatrist therefore confirms the reader's initial apprehension about her. Yet, for strange reasons, these disturbing manifestations notwithstanding, the prison doctor is willing to swear and even sign an undertaking that this woman did not commit the murder for which she is about to be executed.

The narrator's testimony that she had never seen a woman who had killed (11) reaffirms the belief and tenets by which the protagonist's society exists. In her world, the woman is always featured in the cast of a predictably weak and unassuming being. She is not usually expected to so much as raise her voice at a man, not to mention kill one as Firdaus is purported to have done. She is usually seen as the subservient and passive receiver of the abuses of men. El Saadawi therefore states that 'as she unfolded her life before me, as I learnt more and more about her, I developed a feeling and admiration for this woman who seemed to me so exceptional in the world of women to which I was accustomed.' (iii). If she were to succumb to the Egyptian cultural impositions, it would mean that she will acquiesce to a life sentence of complacency and eternal gratitude for the permission to occupy an insignificant space in the man's world.

It is evident that the total control of the woman's life, right from the cradle to the grave, is a patriarchal affair, where she is at the mercy of her father, uncle, husband, boss, and even male clients. Commenting on this, Firdaus states that every woman is a kind of prostitute, and the worst paid prostitute is the house wife (76). While reminiscing over a defining stage in her childhood, Firdaus he reveals that she had been given enough reasons by her own family to regard herself and her gender as an inferior one. Her father for instance, had displayed a persistently shocking negligence towards the things that affected her, her mother and all her female siblings. Through this, the novel reveals how poorly the domineering male figures relate with women. An instance of such neglect is reflected in her recall of the mournful occasions when one of her female siblings died. Her father in reaction to the loss 'would eat his supper, my mother would wash his legs, and then he would go to sleep, just as he did every night' (18). However, where the child that the family lost to death was a boy, her father's expression of grief would be more profound. He usually displayed that by beating his wife presumably for being responsible either for her neglect or any other reason that might led to the lad's death (18).

Following the death of her father, Firdaus' situation would still not change positively as the role of debasing and abusing her is only transferred from one perpetrator to another. Her uncle became her new guardian as he exploited the ample room he had to molest her. On the insistence of her uncle's wife who became intolerant of her, her uncle could no longer keep her under his roof. So he sent her away to the boarding house. (21-22). Immediately after her secondary education, her family parcelled her into an early marriage in

which she suffered untold abuse. At a time when she felt the need to protest the injustice that she was subjected to in the abusive marriage, she rebelled against the marriage institution and fled her husband's house. Not willing to continue enduring the hunger and physical assault inflicted on her by her husband, she sought solace in her uncle and his young wife. But to her chagrin, they offered her no comfort and assurance. In Firdaus' narration of how her husband often 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 (*Woman at Point Zero*, 44).

She was therefore left with no other choice than to return to her husband who resumed a new regime of routinely inflicting worse abuses on her. The same pattern had manifested at every stage of her tortured life. Firdaus learned in a hard way that at every decisive juncture for the determination of her success as a woman, she would always need to depend on one man or the other for that success to materialize. Even as a prostitute, when she resolved to bring a semblance of dignity into her life, she did this by consciously choosing the men whom she cherished as clients. Yet, she suffered immeasurably as a woman who had to continue depending on and counting on men for patronage. She discovered that without the continued patronage of such impious men, she will remain powerless and vulnerable.

2.2 The Pain of Denial and Suppression

Considering Firdaus' ordeal, it is plausible to state that the women of El Saadawi's Egypt suffer repeated provocation that result in the compulsive circumstances which trigger violent reactions against the violators. The narrator seems to justify the murder committed by Firdaus when she comments that 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). As she concludes that the condemned prisoner has courageously liberated herself from the grip of the male-dominated world in a fashion that the psychiatrist herself does not have the courage to dare, it is paradoxical that the narrator/participant who is indeed a doctor that enjoys all the accoutrements of a flourishing and a respectful career in medical practice would turn out to be envious of a condemned prostitute who is regarded as a scum of the society. She discovers that Firdaus' transcendence above the human emotion of fear, especially the fear of death that shackles most human beings places her in a vantage position. The sense of importance that Firdaus succeeded in drawing to herself through her outburst and refusal to deny her crime, or speak about it to anyone is her unique style of taking charge of her destiny. This is what she had lived all her life desiring, and now she has got it. The rare accomplishment plays a significant role in heightening the narrator's desperation to meet with her.

As Firdaus eventually assents to the request made by the narrator to interview her, the latter could not contain her excitement. The prospect of finally meeting the woman whose appointment with the hangman is a few hours away is a kind of heroic accomplishment for the narrator. But Firdaus modestly confesses that she has not achieved so much for the women folk by killing just a man. Her desire is to really die for that crime so as to rescue herself from continued masculine abuse. For her, the experience of death is 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). On another occasion, the narrator states that as far as Firdaus is concerned, to be alive is like dying, and dying was like living. By this, she points at the futility of all the existential concerns of women. This is also confirmed by Wafeya who says 'I feel that you, in particular, cannot live without love' (26). To this, Firdaus truthfully responds 'Yet, I am living without love' (ibid.). Firdaus did realize how dead she had been until the moment she decided to enforce the will to male oppression.

It is worth noting that the narrator's admiration for Firdaus whose quest is not peculiar to her. She admits that the independence and self-respect that she seeks is the same thing that many other women like her seek. Firdaus is to be envied for achieving a feat that is beyond the reach of those many women. Firdaus herself admits that all her life, she has 'been searching for something that fills... [her] with pride' (11). Yet, there have always been patriarchal agencies that always antagonized her quest. Foremost among her desires that were extinguished was her desire to love and to be loved. She narrates how she was deprived all opportunities to visit the fields where she used to play with Muhammadain, her childhood friend (14). And then she laments the conspiracy that deprived her of the joy and the thrill of being a woman. Recalling the moment when her genital was mutilated to fulfil the cultural prescription that aims to clip any tendency for promiscuous living, what they ended up doing is to numb and ultimately destroy her endowment of enjoying

sexual pleasure. As a result of this, she is robbed of a vital aspect of her right as a human being. She still remembers the day when 'a woman who was carrying a small knife or maybe a razor blade....cut off a piece of flesh from between ...[her] thighs' (13). Images of the ordeal kept haunting her even into adulthood as she does not seem to have recovered from the pain between her thighs.

Another aspect of Firdaus' life where she suffered an unjust denial as a woman is in the area of going to the university. She had always believed that education was an elevator and indeed a leveller, since it held the potential to usher her into the respectable elite class of her society. She had dreamed of going to the university in Cairo, but her uncle once laughed at the thought of it as though it was a preposterous idea for a woman to nurse such a dream. The conversation between them reveals this injustice, when in response to her uncle's question about what she will like to do in Cairo, Firdaus had replied: 'I will go to El-Azhar and study like you' (16). The extent to which she was hurt by her uncle's attitude of laughing at her dreams can only be imagined. He even worsened the emotional injury by explaining that university education at El-Azhar was only for men. The future that she had dreamed of in acquiring a university degree was a beautiful one. For her, 'El Azhar was an awesome world peopled only by men, and my uncle was one of them' (21). No one except Firdaus and her tutor, Miss Iqbal thought she deserved a university degree, and since she could not do it herself, she had to live without it.

Going by all the deprivations and constant abuses that Firdaus had suffered, she came to the realisation that despite all the potentials and her dream of becoming an influential politician, in possession of real power, she is only a woman and so cannot attain such heights. Men have therefore continued to be in charge of everything that determine the totality of her existence. She discovers 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) and life continues to be meaningless for the African woman that has dreams. With all the tragic realities that laced Firdaus' life, her vengeful disposition towards men – the perpetrators of her mystery, increased with each new discovery of the deprived and marginalized life that she had to tolerate as a woman.

It helps to note that owing to the fact that Firdaus is not like other women, who submit to domestic violence, her quest for better life eventually brought her to new phases and planes of existence. At the point when she took the moral plunge of embracing the illicit trade of prostitution, she turned out to become the toast of licentious men who find her succulent body irresistible. Then she acquired high tastes and a priceless sense of value, thereby choosing her own men to whom she peddled her services as a sex worker. In spite of her newly-found sense of self-worth and independence, a pimp from nowhere would still come around occasionally to impose his needless services on her. Firdaus' protest against such imposition by the pimp led to the sour discovery that her tormentor was unwilling to acknowledge her independence. In a scuffle that ensued between them, she killed him before he would have the chance to take her down. This incident surprisingly, gives her an exhilarating feeling, having realised that her male tormentors were not invincible and after all. Even now that she has ended up in prison, awaiting death by hanging, she is excited that she is free at last from patriarchal abuse.

The injustices that characterize Firdaus' existence had continued to torment her at regular intervals until the day she decided to put an end to it by murdering the pimp that made living a torture chamber for her. And at such intervals too, Firdaus exhibited symptoms of depression that would later lead her to an unstable mental state. She once asked Miss Iqbal, her college tutor to allow her ventilate her repressed emotions as she pleaded passionately, 'Let me cry' (29). Miss Iqbal had noted that she had never seen Firdaus cry before. She suspected that something must have happened to her that would trigger such an outburst. 'No, nothing has happened Miss Iqbal....I do not know what reason is. Nothing new has happened to me' (30). Later on, during her confession to the narrator, she reports that she 'tried to explain to Miss Iqbal what had happened, but I did not know how to describe it, or to be more precise, I found nothing to talk about. It was as if something had happened which I was unable to recall or as if nothing had happened at all' (31).

3. CONCLUSION

This study has considered the plight of the woman in contemporary Africa as a psychosocial tragedy that is instigated by dehumanizing cultural practices where the weak and vulnerable are subjugated. It indicates that engrained cultural practices as in most parts of Africa, routinely place material value on everything, including the virtue and the dignity of the woman. Having considered Firdaus' agitated mental state as a fallout of the sustained abuses that she had been subjected to since childhood, the novelist's portrayal of her personality aligns with Caruth's characterization of trauma victims who suffer memory loss as an aftermath of their horrendous experiences. It comes to reason that following the numerous spells of ill-treatment that

Firdaus had been exposed to, it could be that she is either trying to forget the experiences or that she really does not remember them all together. The years of her ordeal have serious implications not only for her but for society as a whole.

The constant exploitation and abuse of the woman therefore leaves inefaceable scars on her to such disturbing extent that the significance of her membership of the human family becomes doubtful and therefore usually evinces disparaging reactions. As Firdaus' ordeal reveal, she is trapped in an sympathetic world that is ruled by tenets of patriarchy. Thus, she is left with no choice than to launch a frontal assault on demeaning traditions and institutions that relegate women to the background. The researchers agree with Firdaus who stands tall, demanding social acknowledgement of the dignity of the woman as a being who, like her male counterparts also deserves the right to live and fulfil her potentials.

4. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The researchers acknowledge Covenant University for supporting the study and bearing the cost for participation at the 7th International Conference on Education and Social Sciences 20th - 22nd of January 2020 in Dubai, UAE.

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