

APPENDIX

ARTICLES ABOUT NAWAL EL SAADAWI

Based on <http://www.nawalsaadawi.net/articles/sherifazuhur.htm>,

(Downloaded on October 2003)

The following chapter is posted for informational purposes and is protected by copyright. It has been published within World Literature and Its Times: Africa (Los Angeles: Moss Publishing, 2001).

Section 1. Woman at Point Zero: Nawal El Saadawi, by Sherifa Zuhur

A. The literary work:

A novel based upon the life story of a woman incarcerated in the Qanatir prison in Egypt and executed circa 1973; published in Arabic in Beirut in 1979, in English in 1983, and in French in 1986.

B. Synopsis: Firdaus, a prostitute who has murdered a pimp, is awaiting her execution and relates her experiences from a woman' s perspective to the medical-researcher/author visiting the prison.

Nawal El Saadawi was born in the Egyptian village of Kafr Tahla in the Nile Delta province of Qalubiyya in 1931. Attracted to writing and literature, her high scores on national examinations permitted her to enter the Faculty of Medicine at Cairo University at a time when the student population was still heavily male. She practiced both general medicine and psychiatry, became the

General Director of Health Education for Egypt, and edited a popular magazine focused on health information.

She wrote short stories while a university student, and continued writing fiction in the 1960s. In the 1970s, her writing shifted entirely to gender issues. She became known as the most outspoken critic of the oppression of women and the first to write openly about aspects of female sexuality such as clitoridectomy, incest, prostitution, and the negative effects of the cult of virginity. She addressed these issues in an uncompromising manner devoid of apologia on cultural or religious bases. She has written novels, non-fiction studies of women and men, short stories, essays, and plays, which have been translated into at least ten languages. Her works were banned in Egypt; some were therefore first published in Beirut.

Her career shifted from state funded medical work into full-time research, writing and activism, when in reaction to *Women and Sex* (1972) she was removed from her post as Director of Health Education, and from her editorship of *Health*. The banning of *Women and Sex* followed. She had more time to devote to research on neuroses in women, and this work led her to the women' s prison in Qanatir, where *Woman at Point Zero* takes place.

El Saadawi has declared herself most content when writing fiction, and more attentive to critiques of fiction. (al-El Saadawi in Badran & Cooke, 1990). *Woman at Point Zero* may be her best known novel in English, and was widely read as an example of Arab feminist literature in both the Arab world and the

West. Of her non-fiction works, *al-Wajh al-' Ari aMar' a al Arabiyya*, 1977, translated as *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1980, and 1982) is probably the most influential and well-read in the Arab world, despite censorship of the book in many countries.

C. Other Works in English by Nawal El Saadawi:

1. *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, (*Mudhakkirat Tabiba*, 1960, 1980)
Translated by Catherine Cobham, City Lights Books, 1989. The first chapter of this book is also published as "Growing Up Female in Egypt."
Translated by Fedwa Malti-Douglas. In *Women and the Family in the Middle East*. Edited by Elizabeth W. Fernea. University of Texas at Austin, 1985.
2. *Searching* (*al-Gha' ib*, nd. and 1968) Translated by Shirley Eber. Zed Books, 1991.
3. *God Dies By the Nile*. (*Mawt al-Rajul al-Wahid ' ala al Ard/The Death of the Only Man in the World*, 1974) Translated by Sherif Hetata. Zed Books, 1985.
4. *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*. (*Al-Wajh al-' Ari lil-Mar' a al Arabiyya*. 1977) Translated by Sherif Hetata. Zed Press, 1980, Beacon Press, 1982.
5. *The Circling Song*. (1978) Translated by Marilyn Booth. Zed Books, 1989.

6. Death of an Ex-Minister (Mawt Ma' ali aWazir Sabiqan, 1980)
Translated by Shirley Eber. Methuen, 1987.
She Has No Place in Paradise. (Kanat Hiya al-Ad' af, 1979) Translated by Shirley Eber, Methuen, 1989.
7. "Woman and Islam." in Women' s Studies International Forum Vol. 5, No. 2, 1982.
8. Two Women in One (Imra' tani fImra' a, 1983) Translated by Osman Nusairi and Jana Gough, Al- Saqi, 1985, Seal, 1986.
9. The Fall of the Imam (Suqut al-Imam, Dar al-Mustaqbal al-' Arabi, 1987.) Translated by Sherif Hetata, Methuen, 1988.
10. Memoirs from the Women' s Prison. (Mudhakkirat fi Sijn aNisa, 1984) Translated by Marilyn Booth. University of California, 1994.
North/South: The Nawal El Saadawi Reader. (A collection of essays, conference papers, article and book excerpts.) Zed Press, 1997.

El Saadawi collected case studies in the Qanatir prison in 1973, and in local hospitals, and clinics. She subsequently published her findings in *Women and Neurosis in Egypt* (1976). While engaged in this research, she met and interviewed the prisoner who served as the model for Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero*. Many of El Saadawi' s associates served time in prison for their political views. Her husband remained for thirteen years in jail and El Saadawi herself served a four year prison sentence. Both were imprisoned due to their ideological views and political affiliations. Thus, her choice of the prison as a setting for the story of the repression of women, at the nadir -- point zero --through the tale of an

individual is linked to her convictions about repression as well as gendered exploitation and their detrimental presence in society.

El Saadawi became an advisor on women's programs to the United Nations in Addis Ababa in 1978, and then moved to the Lebanese office of the United Nations in 1979 with regional responsibility for women's programs. . In 1982, El Saadawi and a group of Arab women from various countries established the Arab Women's Solidarity Association. The group organized a conference, sent a delegation to the United Nation's International Conference on Women, and participated in debate and activism within Egypt concerning the proposed amendments of the laws of Personal Status. As an undeclared war between Islamist militants and the government heightened in the late 1980s and early 1990s, El Saadawi's organization was made illegal and closed. The charge was that the AWSA had broken the rules limiting political activity on the part of non-governmental organizations after issuing a statement contrary to the government's position during the Gulf War. El Saadawi received threats, and was obliged to hire an armed guard at her residence. She continued to write, but her feminist activism was curtailed to some degree as a complex backlash against feminism occurred. Although censorship of writing concerned with sexuality, or discussing sexual issues has been on the increase, her work continues to be read widely in the Arab world and in translation. . .

Section 2. Events in History at the Time the Novel Takes Place

A. Events in Twentieth-Century Egypt

During the course of El Saadawi' s own life, the British colonial presence in Egypt was protested in the 1930s and 1940s, and finally forced out under the revolutionary government which came to power in 1952. Egypt had achieved a formal, yet nominal independence in 1922, and King Fuad I and his son, King Faruq, ruled with a Cabinet and Parliament. However, the British retained influence sufficient to oppose cabinets or key politicians and thus to dampen the growth of pluralism or effective democracy, and adequate social policies in the country. Britain had originally occupied Egypt as a part of their global endeavors, and maintained their interest in cheap cotton and the revenues from the Suez Canal through a military presence. Genuine independence and total withdrawal of foreign forces was a continuous political and social theme until the rather surprising military coup in 1952, achieved by a group of young officers in the army, one of whom was Gamal abd al-Nasser.

The Revolution enacted by these young officers changed the power structure of the country and, over a decade or so, its social basis. However, the new regime had not reformulated its platforms, or theorized its future policies when first established under the Presidency of Muhammad Naguib. The King was sent off by ship to Europe -- there was to be no bloodletting of the aristocracy as in the French revolution -- although the elite classes suffered if not at first, eventually under populist policies of the new regime. The peasants and the urban poor, for the most part, appreciated the shift in regime, although due to the

inadequacy of reforms and the economic base of the state, their circumstances were only relieved at the price of growing economic debt and dependency for the state.

Jostling for control, Colonel Gamal abd al-Nasser outmaneuvered his fellow officers. Ali Mahir, a longtime politician resigned in September of 1952. The Officers banned all political parties in 1953, and formally abolished the monarchy in June of that year. Naguib who was supported by the leftists in the next year was stripped of his powers in November of 1954, and Nasser became the voice of Egypt, with Abd al-Hakim Amir in control of the army. The other former ally of the Officers, the Muslim Brotherhood, a grassroots-based Islamist party formed in 1929 by Hasan al-Banna, was repressed after a Muslim Brother attempted to assassinate Nasser in 1954. A worker' s strike was also put down and the government moved against the Communist Party and other leftists.

Idealistic aspects of Nasser' s regime were invoked when he nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956 in response to the withdrawal of an expected loan from the World Bank in that year. The Egyptian masses applauded the seizure of Egypt' s largest source of revenues which had been completely controlled by foreign powers since its construction under the Khedive Ismail in the nineteenth century. The ensuing war in Suez in which the Israelis, French and British attacked Egypt together to punish Nasser for this seizure appeared to the Egyptians to verify the hostile intentions of the West against the young government. Nasser' s other steps away from the West were in the announcement of the "Czech"

arms deal in September of 1955 and his refusal to sign the Washington-sponsored Baghdad pact. He would publicly claim a commitment to neutralism, the independence of Third World nations which should depend neither on the East nor the West. But in fact, the necessity to build up Egypt' s military base, and the military' s dominance in politics meant connections with the Eastern bloc.

Women, who often form the support base for political parties and committees, also provided volunteer work. As in Saadawi' s novel, they were not always given credit equal to that of men. No matter what they did, they faced exploitation, even as the political system touted the improvement of conditions as compared to the previous political era.

Another important aspect of this period was Nasser' s enunciation of Arab unity. The dream of Arab unity was prematurely celebrated in a Union of Egypt with Syria, the United Arab Republic from 1958 to 1961 when the arrangement disintegrated. Nevertheless, many in the region embraced this macro-philosophy which unfortunately further complicated certain gender issues. If Arabs shared a unified culture, then it was an even more delicate matter to indicate the non-monolithic aspects of that culture' s gendered views and customs, or the benefits of modelling the reforms embraced by Western women.

The next primary historical event in Nawal El Saadawi' s lifetime was no doubt the defeat of the Arab states in the war with Israel in 1967. Israel' s pre-emptive strike on June 5 destroyed much of the Egyptian air force while still on the ground. The Israelis then overpowered the Egyptians in the Sinai and occupied

the West Bank and the Golan Heights, Shaken by the military defeat, Nasser announced his resignation, but the public forced him to withdraw it. Intellectuals termed this the nakba, the disaster, simultaneously a political and a cultural crisis, a nadir from which they could descend no further.

For El Saadawi, the decade following Nasser' s death in 1970 embodied a further disintegration in political and social values. To many leftists, the newly devised economic positions and the turning to the West were troubling especially when accompanied by the demise of an Egyptian commitment to populism. As the economic open-door policy, the infitah began, the Soviet advisors had been removed, and international aid agencies expected the country to pursue more rational economic policies and embark on privatisations.

El Saadawi' s politics of resistance to oppression whether gendered, or simply authoritarian was forged through her historical experience in Egypt in these decades. The Egyptian public was regaled with promises that the demise of the ancient regime, and the lingering British would bring a new age. Yet, the heroine of *Woman at Point Zero* does not experience a newly tolerant nor materially plentiful existence. Indeed, the immediate competition for resources repeatedly favoured the males in the story' s setting, father over wife and children, boys over girls, uncle over niece, employers over female workers, and pimp over prostitute and so on.

The seemingly a historical background of the novel is deceptive. For example, the problems engendered through migration from the countryside to

the city is another reflection of the historical realities of the period when large numbers of migrants to Cairo began to crowd into areas they could ill afford to live in, where there was little or no infrastructure, and higher unemployment.

In other works of literature, the countryside is represented as the site of morality and honesty while the city is alienating and corrupting. El Saadawi paints a less naive portrait of the countryside, where the protagonist grows up and the girl child survives through luck as other siblings die. The city symbolizes the loss of her immediate family, the attainment of an education, and the centre of multiple forms of exploitation.

Prostitution, the heroine' s metier in the novel, is a rarely discussed topic in standard histories of Egypt. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the country was the site of a multi-ethnic and highly varied trade in women, ranging from white foreigners to Africans, to child prostitutes. There were many debates over the legal means of allowing, controlling, or attempting to curtail the volume of prostitution (Badran, 1995) and the situation was exacerbated in some periods, for example during World War II by the presence of large numbers of foreign troops committed to action in the Western desert, and who took their leaves for rest and recreation in Cairo..

The deeper questions concerning prostitution concern its relevance to the determination of female worth on the basis of sexual value in society. If prostitution is simply a criminal act, then the heroine-criminal is paradoxically more liberated when overtly trading her sexual favours for money than she is at

any other point in her life history. El Saadawi is contrasting Firdaus' choice with the role society expected of her -- becoming a respectable wife. But her final connections (her uncle and his wife) were solely concerned with finding her a husband who would provide her material support. And so we are made aware of all the wives who trade their sexual favours for regular subsistence, housing, support of their offspring, and who may strike a bad bargain on one or another score. The prostitute who lives outside the accepted social and religious order may be less oppressed than women who accepted the prevailing social conventions. In any case, neither Islamic mores, the revolutionary government, or the forces of progress in the 1970s wiped out prostitution or the exploitation of women in society.

B. Women in Modern Egypt History

B.1. Women and Feminism in Egypt

1890s Ai' ishah Ismat al'aimuriyya publishes poetry and essays

1899 Qasim Amin' s book The Liberation of Women (Tahrir aMar' a) ignites public debate

1909 Bahithat al-Badiya (the pen name of Malak Hifni Nassif) publishes al-Nasa' iyat, an anthology of speeches and essays on women.

1919 Veiled women participate in the nationalist demonstrations and protests against the British.

1920 Nabawiya Musa, an educator dedicated to the advancement of women through education publishes al-Mar' ah wa aAmal (Women and Work)

1922 Egypt granted nominal independence by Great Britain

1923 Establishment of the Egyptian Feminist Union

1923 Huda Sha' arawi and Saiza Nabarawi, feminist nationalists cast off their ~~for~~ veils in public

1944 The Egyptian Feminist Union hosts the Arab Feminist Conference

1945 Creation of the Arab Feminist Union

1949 Inji Aflatun, painter and writer publishes Nahnu al-Nisa' aMisriyat (We Egyptian Women) a work that analyzes women' s oppression and imperialism

1952 Revolution of the Free Officers displaces the regime of King Farouk

1954, Amina Said, journalist and feminist founds the magazine Hawwa a popular broad-based publication.

1954, Duriyya Shafik, philosopher, writer and founder of the Daughter of the Nile Union goes on a hunger strike to protest women' s lack of political rights.

1956 The Suez War

1956 Egyptian women achieve suffrage

1959 Nawal El Saadawi writes Memoirs of a Female Physician

1967 Egypt and the Arab states suffer military defeat

1970 The death of President Nasser

1973 Nawal El Saadawi begins her research at the Qanatir prison

1973 The Ramadan War and the crossing of Suez

1974 Laws under girding the economic opening of Egypt are introduced.

1976 An Islamist organization attempts assassination of the President at the Military Academy

1979 Reforms of the laws of Personal Status are introduced

1981 Nawal El Saadawi is arrested. President Sadat is assassinated by a member of the Jihad organization.

1982 The founding of the Arab Women' s Solidarity Association

1985 Personal Status Reforms are amended following much debate and reworking.

1991 Cairo office of the Arab Women' s Solidarity Association is closed.

1998 Debates on ' urfi marriage and reforms to personal status issue.

2000 Passage of new divorce law allowing khul' without restricted grounds and recognizing ' urfi marriage.

As Egyptian society was transformed from its condition in the reign of King Farouk to the revolutionary era, to the reorientation to the West under President Anwar Sadat, women and popular ideas about gender relations and the expansion of female sex roles also underwent a degree of transformation. The harem system had declined earlier in the century, and elite women gained some mobility in the public sphere, and rights to education and entry into various professions by mid-century.

However, the lives of Egyptian peasants and of the urban lower classes remain far less altered to this day. El Saadawi emphasizes the fact that the condition of women of the masses, or more importantly the gender ideology of the masses changed very slowly in this period. Even women of the elite and the middle-classes face various forms of discrimination although they may be alleviated by their financial status, access to legal remediation, or the gradual changes affecting certain professions and areas of the economy as an increasing proportion of women participate.

Women and girls in the countryside had not been subjected to the Ottoman face veil and the practices of female seclusion because their labour was necessary for survival. Strong preferences for male children were in place due to the

patrilineal and patrilocal features of society. If girls survived their early childhood, they were, and often still are circumcised at the age of six or seven to dampen their sexual urges, and ensure virginity -- the practice involved removal of all or part of the clitoris and was painful, unsanitary and led to various medical and psychological complications. A movement against female circumcision among the educated classes began in the 1920s and the 1930s but the current statistics indicate that in Egypt' s pyramidshaped population -- the wide base being those of low-income-- the practice has continued in the countryside and the city, among Muslims and among Christians.

Girls, indeed most boys as well as girls, were illiterate earlier in the century, and peasant families tried to educate one or two particularly bright children if possible. As girls were married early, to ensure virginity at marriage, it was difficult, particularly in past decades to convince families that there was merit in educating their female children. What we now term domestic violence was rampant, mitigated when women had good relationships with their own families who could serve as mediators. Women' s specific rights of divorce, custody over children, and to relief from an abusive spouse were limited legally due to the prevailing interpretations of shari' ah, Islamic law that had formed the legal basis for the personal status codes governing these aspects of women' s lives. Major reforms took place in these areas somewhat later, in the Sadat era (in 1979) and even then were implemented extra legally resulting in great controversy and eventual amendments to the new laws. Groups like Nawal El Saadawi' s AWSA were very important in exemplifying indigenous feminists who recognized the

need for permanent legal remedies for women. Westerners frequently attribute women' s difficulties in entering the public sphere, their lower proportion of the workforce in the Arab world as compared to some other regions, and the customs of veiling and of separation of the sexes to unfair and sexist ideas inherent in the religion of Islam. These views, generally based upon a historical or uninformed visions of the religion, are difficult to challenge, dovetailing as they do with the Western media' s generally negative portrait of Islam and Muslims. Some critics of El Saadawi, have incorrectly represented her arguments as an attack on Islam. El Saadawi' s views on the sources of patriarchal practices, misogyny or gender biases are far more nuanced than either camp -- conservative critics of feminism or Westerners critical of Islam. While she does not exonerate Muslims from disadvantaging, or mistreating women, she does not consider Islam to be the source of the problem. However, she attacks the ways in which Muslims adopted practices that predated Islam or derived perhaps from Byzantine or Sassanian culture such as stricter veiling, and the extraordinary valuation given to virginity, leading, in a male-dominated society to the culture of honour and shame. And she opposes the practice of female circumcision as it bears extremely little rationale in Islamic doctrine (evidence of the rite but not of its recommendation or necessity)

While the West and Western feminists have no difficulty perceiving the patriarchal aspects of women' s situation in Egypt, they are generally unaware of the degree or sources of women' s power in Arab society which lie, once gain within the family and in cultural models for women that are anything but passive

and meek. In the late 1940s and 1950s, a second generation of feminists met, wrote, and fought for political reforms in Egypt. The bulk, however, of the initial benefits to women accrued to those of the elite and members of the middle class who had acquired the opportunities for higher education or professional preparation.

The Nasser regime declared itself to be committed to improving the condition of the masses; meaning, the peasantry and the urban lower classes. But the government did not engage in much discussion of women' s situation, fearing religious conservative reaction. One of the allies of the Free Officers was the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization which engaged in activities targeting the regime at a time when Nasser-led wing of the Revolutionary Command Council had just emerged victorious over its leftist rivals. The crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood aided the militarization of the regime, but stymied any productive discussion about the contradictions between the regime' s social policies and current Islamic practice in Egypt on social issues. The Brotherhood had championed modest dress for women, and opposed the vote prior to its extension to women in 1956. The government wanted to allow for incremental and gradual in women' s lives through policies supporting the nationalization of education and health, and in those designed to heighten productivity, but not to rock the boat with any dramatic changes, or open discussions of gender issues.

After centuries of foreign domination of Egypt from the Hellenic era up to the Turko-Circassian elites under the late Ottoman Empire to the British, Nasser' s

anti-imperialist policies were applauded, particularly by the masses. But they, along with other citizens, particularly the educated, and members of political opposition also suffered from two other features of society at mid-century: the growth and centralization of the state bureaucracy, and the repressive measures used by the regime to monitor and silence its critics. These two tendencies were attacked by intellectuals and creative writers who suffered from censorship, spates of imprisonment and these conditions formed the basis, along with sexual oppression for the extreme alienation from society that is described in this novel.

Women were also caught in the struggle over their identity as custodians of Middle Eastern/Arab/Egyptian culture. Although discussion and public debate over the status of women had ensued in the nineteenth century, the Arab world saw the preservation of monogamous marriage with women's primary role as mothers to be a religiously sanctioned structure not to be abandoned for the free dating and high divorce rate of the West. Discussions about sexuality were more problematic than those involving women's rights to study or work, whether such debate touched on female circumcision or the difficulties of women who were expected to maintain their virginity at marriage or face death at the hands of their male relatives. The point was that in an environment where Westerners had imposed their customs and ideas from 1882 to 1952, a Western version of feminism could be attacked (and was) as being a weapon directed at Arabo-Muslim culture itself.

Section 3. The Novel in Focus

A. Characters List

- **The journalist-** The recipient of the story.
- **Firdaus-** Main character of the novel. The novel displays her journey through life. Firdaus goes through many hardships including a harsh home life, incest, rape and death.
- **Firdaus' Father-** A harsh man who demonstrates the male stereotype in the novel. He is selfish and makes sure that he is served before others. His selfishness even kills off his children.
- **Firdaus' Uncle-** Suggested to have incested Firdaus. He sent Firdaus to secondary school. Later, he sells her to his new wife's uncle.
- **Miss Iqbal-** Teacher at secondary school that Firdaus falls in love with.
- **Sheikh Mahmoud- Firdaus' husband.** Beat her excessively and forced her to have sex. Watched her as she ate to make sure she did not waste food. Ugly older male with whole in his chin.
- **Bayoumi-** rescued Firdaus from the street and treated her well. Eventually turned into the novel's stereotypical male by forcing sex on her and allowing other men to force sex on her.
- **Sharifa-** rescued Firdaus from Bayoumi. She gave Firdaus beautiful clothes and bedding. She became Firdaus' pimp.
- **Di'aa- Friend of Firdaus.** Tells her that she is not respected because she is a prostitute.

- **Ibrahim- Coworker of Firdaus.** She falls in love with him and he marries the chairman's daughter breaking Firdaus' heart. Later she says that he used her for free sex.
- **Marzouk-** Takes over Firdaus as her pimp. She kills him with his own knife after he attempts to stop her from leaving him.
- **Prince-** Pays Firdaus \$3,000 for sex. He thought she was a princess but calls the police after Firdaus tells him who she really is.

B. Plot Summary.

The novel opens with the author's account of her efforts to obtain an interview with a woman prisoner whose unique demeanour fascinates and troubles the prison doctor, the warden, and eventually, the author. The woman, Firdaus, a prostitute, whose name means 'paradise' in Arabic is soon to be executed for murdering a man who had proclaimed himself her pimp. The prison doctor and warden inform the unnamed author (El Saadawi) that Firdaus will not speak to her; she has even refused to sign an appeal to the President that would commute her death sentence to life imprisonment. The author is inexplicably but deeply troubled by Firdaus' refusal to be interviewed. She is then abruptly summoned to Firdaus' cell where she listens to the prisoner's tale. El Saadawi, as in her other autobiographical and semi-autobiographical works, emphasizes the factual nature of the incident, despite the narrator's sensation of a dream-like quality to her experience:

"But this was no dream. This was not air flowing into my ears. The woman sitting on the ground in front of me was a real woman, and the voice filling my ears with its sound, echoing in a cell where the window and door were tightly shut, could only be her voice, the voice of Firdaus." (El-Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero*, 7)

Firdaus' tale explains her hatred of men, arising from the male oppression she has experienced throughout her life. As a child, her father beat his wife, and neglected his female children, eating when the rest of the family had no food. Without explanation, her clitoris was excised, according to the custom known as female circumcision, and she was no longer allowed to roam the fields, but expected to stay at home, cleaning and cooking. She was sexually molested by her uncle, whom she nonetheless loved dearly. Eventually she followed her uncle to the city of Cairo where he studied at the religious university, al-Azhar. El Saadawi refuses to use the rural traditions or piety of her society as an explanation for male exploitation or devaluation of women; instead she establishes the ways in which Firdaus experiences each layer of oppression from birth onward.

The young girl' s self-esteem is already compromised as is evident in her distaste for her own reflection in the mirror. Yet she loves her studies and her school in Cairo, her opportunity to escape the animalistic destiny she witnessed in the countryside. She keeps house for her uncle who continues to molest her, while serving as her protector, until he marries a woman who resents Firdaus. To be more precise she resents having to provide for her. Firdaus is then transferred to

the boarding section of her school where her love of reading leads her to further understand the domination of men throughout history. She falls in love with a sympathetic teacher, Ms. Iqbal, the only adult who has shown any unblemished concern for her.

Her aunt and uncle view her as a useless burden after her graduation, and marry her off to the elderly Sheikh Mahmoud. He has an oozing tumour on his chin, and is physically revolting to Firdaus, but he insists on sex and scrutinizing her constantly. When he beats her with his shoe and she runs back to her aunt and uncle for intercession, her aunt explains that "the precepts of religion permitted such punishment." (Woman at Point Zero, 44) Sheikh Mahmoud, realizing that Firdaus' family will not intercede as is possible in other a final situations, beats her more severely and she runs away into the streets. The owner of a coffee-house offers her temporary shelter, but eventually abuses her as well, locking her in his flat, raping her, and sending in his cronies to have intercourse with her.

She escapes, once again, into the streets, meeting a woman, Sharifa Salah el Dine who surprises Firdaus by asking who has abused her, and installs her in Sharifa' s luxurious apartment on the Nile. Sharifa teaches Firdaus that in this world dominated by men, she must value herself, recognize her own beauty and culture. She receives male clients while Sharifa collects the payments. Firdaus notes her own sensuality and enjoyment of other material pleasures that life with Sharifa provides, but she cannot enjoy sex. One client, who senses that sex, is physically painful rather than pleasurable to her, vows that he will take her away

from Sharifa. Firdaus, overhears an argument between this man, a former lover of Sharifa' s and her mistress followed by their violent lovemaking. She flees, as has become a pattern, into the streets.

She encounters a policeman who threatens her with arrest if she will not have sex with him, and then a stranger who rescues her from the streets, sleeps with her and leaves her ten pounds, the first money she has earned for herself. Firdaus, while independently operating as a prostitute, describes this period of her life as a time when she owned her own body.

Her self-content is ruined when a client speaks of her lack of respectability. Firdaus responds "My work is not worthy of respect. Why then do you join in it with me?" (71) It is incompressible, naturally, that men' s reputation should suffer from extramarital sex, it is only women' s reputations that are tarnished. She seeks and eventually obtains a job at an industrial company. She lives miserably on her poor wages, but refuses the attentions of men. Despite her efforts to attain respectability, she eventually realizes that as a poorly paid employee, she has gained no social status or respect, and that in fact, prostitution is less confining than the life of female employees who are terrified of losing their jobs.

Firdaus falls in love a fellow worker, Ibrahim, who is the head of a revolutionary committee within the company. She labours incessantly for the committee, as have women in so many political or revolutionary organizations only to discover that her lover has become engaged to the company chairman' s

daughter. This betrayal is overwhelming, as with the exception of her crush on Ms. Iqbal, she had not previously loved another human being, and is numbed by an overwhelming alienation. She picks up a man in the street, and reflects: "Revolutionary men with principles were not really different from the rest. They used their cleverness to get, in return for principles, what other men buy with their money. Revolution for them is like sex for us. Something to be abused. Something to be sold." (88)

Firdaus returns to prostitution. Her financial success brings her to the attention of a head of state, whom she refuses, and men who wish to marry her. One, a dangerous pimp, Marzouk, threatens her, takes over her business and uses his network of connections to his advantage. When she attempts to leave, they argue. He slaps her, and Firdaus stabs him, discovering that her fear for Marzouk, indeed her fear of all men and of the vicious nature of her society has vanished. She walks again into the street, where a prince propositions her. She terrifies him when she demonstrates her lack of fear, and he screams until the police arrive, whereupon they arrest her and transports her to prison.

Firdaus declares to the narrator that while she does not fear death, she understands that she is intolerable to her captors for her defiance threatens the social order. Her final words, before she is marched out of the cell to her death are "I spit with ease on their lying faces and words, on their lying newspapers." (103). The narrator is left with a sense of shame -- at her own accommodation with the society that has so dishonourably dealt with Firdaus -- and ends the novel with the

words "And at that moment I realized that Firdaus had more courage than I." (108).

Rejecting Authoritarianism and Domination El Saadawi' s views are Marxist, nationalist, Third Worldist and Arabist, as well as feminist. The dynamic she constructs in *Woman at Point Zero* between the empowered physician whose modern science is useless to cure the ills of Firdaus and her society concerns women in the Arab world, and the universal exploitation of women and reduction of their human value to their female bodies. On a third level, the novel gives voice to El Saadawi' s Marxist views concerning the exploitation of Egypt itself, doomed through the world economic system to prostitute itself to outside interest, due at least in part to an authoritarian, skimming government of "masters" which could be likened to Marzouk, the pimp.

C. Gendered Exploitation

The feminist critique of Firdaus' world is the heart of the novel. It is accomplished through the narrator whose medical profession sets her apart from the prisoner, impels her to recognize the specific physical manifestations of women' s oppression, and permits her ultimately, to explore and give voice to Firdaus' experiences as another case study. The power of Firdaus' testimony is dual: first in the layering of her gendered experiences from circumcision to abuse to devaluation, beating, rape, to her final confrontation with Marzouk in which he divides the world into masters and slaves, implying that as a woman, she can only be a slave -- a role she rejects by murdering him. Secondly, the power of this

portrait of women' s oppression is due to its historical validity-- while not all women sell sex to unknown men, they may prostitute themselves to husbands, families, and jobs. While not all women are raped, many are secretly subjected to sexual abuse and the figures of female circumcision have ranged from 55% to 96% of ever married women in Egypt as of 1995. El Saadawi who has written out the outset of the story, that this is "the real story of a woman," explained in an interview that she added only ten to twenty percent of her own invention to the actual prisoner' s story (El Saadawi in Badran & Cooke, 402).

D. Female circumcision

(known in the West as female genital mutilation and most recently brought to the attention of the English language readership by Alice Walker' s *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, *Warrior Marks*, and the media) is a problem specific to Egypt, the Sinai, the Sudan, the Horn of Africa, and a geographic belt stretching to the west across Africa from the southern Sahara to the nations just below it. Other problematic issues for Egyptian women include the systemic devaluation of female children in comparison to male children, arranged marriages to older men, harassment in the workplace and public venues -- problems they share with women throughout the Middle East, indeed throughout much of the world, and which have only been addressed legally in the latter half of the twentieth century. Firdaus learns that modernity and the gradations of social class do not seem to mediate the treatment of women she discovers this initially through historical works, and later in her own lived experiences.

I preferred books about rulers. I read about a ruler whose female servants and concubines were as numerous as his army and another whose only interests in life were wine, women, and whipping his slaves. A third cared little for women, but enjoyed wars, killing, and torturing men. Another of these rulers loved food, money and hoarding riches without end. Still another was possessed with such an admiration for himself and his greatness that for him no one else in the land existed. There was also a ruler so obsessed with plots and conspiracies that he spent all his time distorting the facts of history and trying to fool his people.

I discovered that all these rulers were men. What they had in common was an avaricious and distorted personality, a never-ending appetite for money, sex and unlimited power. They were men who sowed corruption on the earth, and plundered their peoples, men endowed with loud voices, a capacity for persuasion, for choosing sweet words and shooting poisoned arrows. Thus, the truth about them was revealed only after their death, and as a result I discovered that history tended to repeat itself with a foolish obstinacy. (26-27)

For Firdaus discovers that the rulers of her own era are no better, nor are the ordinary men she encounters in her life.

E. National Exploitation/the World Context

Egypt has been frequently represented in the iconography (sculpture, cartoons, and paintings) of the twentieth century as a woman who confronts the more sophisticated, male powers of the world. (Rifaey and Zuhur, 2001) If Firdaus is understood to represent Egypt, in this novel, she prostitutes herself in

the world' s economic and political systems with no respite in sight If she were to revolt against the Western companies and the Gulf princes, or the contemporary privatization campaigns, the rulers and jailers would be toppled -- their power is based upon repression of their own society. El Saadawi' s Third Worldist and Marxist perspectives have not always been understood, or appreciated either by scholars of the Middle East, or Western feminists who fail to understand Egypt' s postcolonial sensitivities.

F. Reception of the Work.

El Saadawi' s previous nonfiction writing had already attracted a readership in the Arab world and alerted conservatives and some authorities to the polemics she presented to the public. *Woman at Point Zero* was therefore received by the Arabic-reading audience, and by feminists outside the Arab world with acclaim for the author' s courage, the power of her prose, and her ideological message. Those who objected to her earlier work, also criticized *Woman at Point Zero* from a philosophical base, and later as intellectual circles moved away from the radical Marxism of the era in which the book was written, began to incorporate a literary critique as well. Such critics argued that El Saadawi' s feminist zeal was too overwhelming, and that she subordinated her characters and therefore her language, and writing structures to the "political" novel format. On this point, scholars are quite divided, in part because the style of the novel in Arabic was quite different than its counterpart in English, and has been undergoing significant change over the course of the twentieth century.

Her previous work the *Hidden Face of Eve* had made an especially marked impact, as the most insightful and forceful critique by an insider of the issues of gender and sexuality in the Arab world. This insider status, and her construction of a medical framework, i.e. a scientific framing of the problem, to that non-fiction work and also in this novel contributed the popularity of the work in Arabic, despite its censorship which prevented the sale of the book in Egypt, but not the circulation of copies of the novel obtained elsewhere.

Woman at Point Zero has remained in print since its appearance in English and has been praised for the self-same features for which the author is also criticized. For example, the device of incorporating aspects of women's personal experience into expository or writing of fiction is a striking aspect of much of the author's output. El Saadawi's own experience of circumcision and discrimination is told through the voice and experience of Firdaus, and so they are bound together in femaleness, although El Saadawi the professional, medical, narrator is as far in terms of social status as she can be from Firdaus, the prostitute who ultimately rejects all of society's rules and ideals. The reader is convinced that she is writing the account of real life identifies with Firdaus and experiences vicariously the terms of patriarchy created in the story. However, Ouyang criticizes her for continuing the tradition of the Arab "novel of ideas" in which the message is the ultimate protagonist and the heroine, and the men in the novel remain stereotypical to some degree (Ouyang, 1996, 459) as Joseph Zeidan has described in greater detail, showing that the men in El Saadawi's works are

described with animal metaphors, or bestialized. (Zeidan, "Representations of Men in the Work of Nawal El Saadawi," 1996).

In English, Fedwa Malti-Douglas has most carefully examined El Saadawi' s work, locating it within a tradition stemming from the medieval literary corpus which problematizes women' s physicality, and, that like El Saadawi, wields the female voice, cleverly in narration to subvert the rule or accounting of patriarchy. (Malti-Douglas, 1991 and 1995). She compares El Saadawi with the Egyptian writer Taha Husayn (author of *al-Ayyam*) both suffering from a particular handicap -- blindness in the case of Husayn, and female gender in El Saadawi' s own work. A cure for society and for these "disabilities" is a very different task for the two authors -- *Woman at Point Zero* presenting an unattainable transformation, and liberation for Firdaus only through death. Malti-Douglas insists that readers understand *Woman at Point Zero* within the nuanced framework of feminism created by El Saadawi (Malti-Douglas, 1995). The mixed reactions to the author' s work are understood by El Saadawi herself as the concurrence of progress and retrogression which occur simultaneously. (al-El Saadawi, "Reflections" in Badran and Cooke, 1990).

4. Events in History at the Time the Novel Was Written

In El Saadawi' s later writing a discourse concerning the struggle between the North and the South has to some degree subsumed earlier "Third-Worldist" politics (El Saadawi herself refuses to use the term Third World). El Saadawi does not view the exploitation of women in Egyptian society as an isolated

phenomenon. Neither, according to her, is it simply part of the universal manifestation of sexism. Rather it has occurred historically, as Marx and Engels pointed out, as the most basic form of exploitation within a productive unit, the family. Then, on a secondary level, sexism is exacerbated in a developing society where the competition for resources is fierce. On the tertiary level, within the New World Order which has essentially developed since the early 1970s when the narration of the novel takes place, Egypt itself is oppressed and exploited in ways that had not yet been realized in the colonial period, or in the "liberal" age from 1922 to the 1952 revolution. Nonetheless, the dynamics of colonialism and their residue in the post-colonial era are a primary feature marking social and political development in Egypt. It might sound nonsensical to a Western feminist to point to underdevelopment as a source of stress on gender relations, but many other feminists of the developing world agree with El Saadawi on this point.

The most important historical features taking place while El Saadawi was writing the novel were the Infitah policies of economic opening in Egypt, the development of a contemporary and radical Islamism, or Islamic fundamentalism, and the increasing economic dependence of Egypt itself, on international aid agencies, and until the Camp David treaties of 1979 upon income from the Gulf states.

Some of that latter income came through governmental aid, but a portion of it was derived through tourist revenues and there were some tensions between male tourists from the Gulf and Egyptians around issues of gender, due to the

association of prostitution and other illegal vices with the entertainment businesses. Tales abounded of Gulf visitors causing prices to rise, hunting for Egyptian prostitutes, seeking out little girls and buying them from their families. El Saadawi may have intended *Firdaus* to stand as a metaphor for Egypt itself, forced in such a difficult period to please all the outsiders, and to prostitute her ideals.

The growth of Islamism in Egypt and other Arab states was not welcomed by leftists or for the most part, liberal feminists because of the setbacks for women observed at the outset of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the increased emphasis upon Islamic dress, and separation of the sexes among local Islamist groups. It was in this decade, the 1970s that radical Islamist groups in Egypt gained some supporters and overtly opposed the existing government resulting at times in mass arrests following certain incidents.

The decade also brought advances for women, some cosmetic, or unfortunately temporary as with the legal reforms in 1979 to the Personal Status Codes. El Saadawi and other feminists were very active in this period in establishing networks to continue forward motion in reforms for women. But the effects of the Islamist groups could be seen in a backlash toward increased reforms for women.

It is significant that as the novel was being written, Nawal El Saadawi had, as a result of censorship and official disapproval moved fully into the persona of a feminist activist in an era characterized by an abrupt turning away from the

political and economic goals of the earlier decade. Firdaus claims at the end of the novel, "It is my truth that frightens them." El Saadawi seems to be instilling the urgency of Firdaus' statement with her own newly found life calling, and the warning tone of a prophet.

