

# Book Review

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**Title of the Book:**

*Woman at Point Zero*

**Author of the Book:**

*Nawal El Sadawi*

**Date of Publication: 1973 G.C.**

**Number of Pages: 114**

The author of this novel is a well-known Egyptian writer, feminist and politician. She was first trained as a medical doctor and psychiatrist before she took writing as a career. As a medical practitioner, she had the opportunity to closely observe the various problems Egyptian women faced. In her novels, she raised recurrent themes revealing the miserable life of Arab women and criticized the underpinning social and political forces that contributed to that effect. *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor (1958)*, *Woman at Point Zero (1973)*, *God Dies by the Nile (1976)*, are a few cases in point.

According to the information on her website, she suffered imprisonment, intimidation and later on she was exiled as a consequence of her writings and political participations.

This is probably a true depiction of male-domination, she was writing about.

*Woman at Point Zero*, the particular focus of this review, is based on a true story of a woman named Firdaus. It is the last confession of a woman, who, through out her life, suffered the injustice and oppression of a system until the point at which she couldn't put up with it any longer. It is the story of a woman who learnt lessons after lessons about life in the most shocking way. It is the story of a woman's yearning and striving for the freedom of her body and mind; of reaping the fruits of her labor and keeping her dignity; of leading a

decent and 'respectable' life and languishing in destitution.

**Narrative Technique and Style**

The language of her narration is simple, clear and precise. Any reader with an intermediate level of the English language can read and comprehend it. Besides, the story is narrated in the first person point of view, a technique which draws readers very close to the narrator. The pain Firdaus feels, the knowledge she draws from her experiences, the hopes and fears that linger in her mind all become ours as the story progresses from page to page. And before knowing it all too well, readers find themselves as her supporters, even to the extent of being happy when she draws fame and money out of prostitution and when she violently attacks the pimp that tries to keep her his slave.

**Awakening to the Stark Realities of Life**

**The first Awakening**

Sadawi's deep understanding of child psychology becomes apparent when she eloquently explains the thoughts, hopes, fears and frustrations of the little Firdaus. From the day she knew herself, Firdaus contemplates over innocent but mind boggling questions. She asks herself whether the kind and caring mother she had known of as a little girl is the one she has now; she questions herself whether she was born of a mother and a father whom she knows well. She muses as to who she is and for how long she is going to suffer. Such innocent questions show the deep confusion the little girl is in. She neither solves the riddle nor finds a better way out of the misery. But she is aware of the harsh

treatment she is receiving at her tender age from the closest people to her. Only her uncle and her memory of the love and attention she received as a baby are her units of decency.

**The Second Awakening**

Probably the main focus of the novel is to show how male-dominated this world is and how women suffer directly or indirectly from the social and political systems built over the years.

At school, Firdaus learns that the most avaricious, lustful and cruel leaders in the world are all male. She takes for granted and believes that these male leaders create wars and cause atrocities just to satisfy their unquenchable appetite for fame, power and money.

And out of school, Firdaus learns, even the closest male can marry off his little niece to a niggardly, sick, old man just for a few hundred piastre of dowry however clever and successful she might be in her education. He can even decide that she cannot learn with men at the university although she excels many of them. And there is nobody else in the world that stands in her defense.

**The Third Awakening**

It is through the realization of the real value of money that Firdaus transforms into a quite different girl. All along her life she tries to do the most precarious jobs imaginable that could earn her a lot of money. But it is either her father, Bayoumi (her 'rescuer'), or Shariffa (her 'trusted' friend) who enjoy the fruits of her labor. She finally finds herself a different woman when she receives a ten pound note from a man she sleeps with on her own accord. She realizes that she can do whatever

she likes with the money without being watched or controlled by any one else. She comes to realize that one can earn the tacit respect obtainable from paying for their own expenses. From then on, she begins looking people straight in the eye. She can sleep or eat or walk as she wishes. In short, she becomes her own master. This freedom, however, is short-lived for she happens to understand that there are 'respectable' and 'disrespectable' ways of earning a living. One day, Firdaus hears a disturbing remark from one of her clients-that her job is not 'respectable'. This remark sparks a profound poser in her mind that she starts to contemplate it for a long time. She finally awakens to the idea that whatever money and freedom one can obtain through some means, the society may reject. And an 'honorable' person should look for a 'respectable' means of earning a living so that the society can look up to these fellows with reverence. So she goes on looking for such a chance.

#### The Fourth Awakening

What Firdaus learns about 'respectable' ways of living is paradoxical. A woman earns the least from the jobs that are said to be respectable, and yet she is looked down on, for she must travel in a crowded bus, live in a small room and use public toilets. That is all a 'respectable' job can give a girl having only a secondary school certificate. In return for her sacrifices, she is paid for with more contempt and disrespect from men.

Much worse, she realizes, some women go out with their supervisors for better reports and

promotion. They end up doing what they are trying to avoid in the first place. The author says it is men who put women under such precarious conditions and despise them for being what they want them to be.

In due course of time, Firdaus recognizes that an out-right prostitute is better because she has better freedom of choice and the power to decide her 'real worth' in the time of negotiating. She can defend herself with her money because she can hire better lawyers and buy connections and even a little media publicity. If she can play the right buttons, she can become 'respectable'. But the absurdity with all this is that a woman has to sell her 'honor' to become 'honorable'.

#### The Final Awakening

The final lesson Firdaus learns is that there are always unbeatable oppressors who have more money and better connections. Truth doesn't really matter whether it is on the side of the oppressor or the oppressed. What really matters is the fact that these people have the power to undermine all norms any given society puts in place to protect the weak.

Firdaus finally falls prey to one of such men. All her attempts to have justice fail and she finally becomes to apprehend that extraordinary problems need extraordinary solutions.

She then realizes that the cause of her misery can indeed be frightened just like an ordinary human being. The only way she can regain her mind, body and complete freedom is, she thinks, by destroying the cause of her plight and getting rid of all her

fears and hopes. And that is what she does. She then refuses the advice she is given to appeal to the court trying her case, for it means reliving the old fears, hopes and desires. She already reaches a point of no return.

#### The Atmosphere of the Story

The story is mostly a very sad one from the start until the end. Right from childhood, we follow the main character experiencing her misery and suffering. We feel her pain, get angry at all the people who enslave her at one time or another and learn the bitter lessons with her. And we can't help but wish her a success by all means 'respectable' or otherwise. When her short-lived successes become finally over, we find ourselves panicking with her. In this way the writer takes us from sorrow to success and then to deep sorrow.

The mood we readers develop in the course of our reading this book is one that forces us to be full of regrets in favor of Firdaus and an aversion to the system which does very little to the weak.

#### Conclusion

*Woman at Point Zero* has gained world wide recognition. It is one of the most successful books that depicts the plight of women and the systems that contribute to this effect. It won't be an exaggeration to say that the book has the power to create awareness about the predicaments of women even more so than organizations working in the area. Owing to its educative content and literary value, college and university students can gain a lot if teachers or instructors make it one of the required readings.



“Prostitution is a blight on the human race...for if you men did not impose chastity on women as a necessary virtue while refusing to practice it yourselves, they would not be rejected by society for yielding to the sentiments of their hearts, nor would seduced, deceived, and abandoned girls be forced into prostitution.”

**Flora Tristan** (1803 - 1844)

French feminist writer and revolutionary Socialist.