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Ambivalence of Female Power and Prostitution in Nawal El Saadawi's Woman at Point Zero

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Abstract: ***Several factors in contemporary society have made diverse demands of women. The demands have necessitated the search of options so as to lope with the challenges and pressures of modern life. This study identifies that most studies of the status of women usually focus on the oppression, stereotyping, and dehumanisation of women in patriarchal society only. However, this paper examined how the female in Nawal El Saadawi's Woman at Point Zero transcended the limit, exhibiting qualities that are perceived to be those of the male and in addition recognises that many women identify prostitution as a survival strategy; the reality of using what they have to obtain what they need. This creates ambivalence in their nature. This study on one hand projects the weakness of women in prostitution and on the other fills the critical gap by showing how the stereotype of the weaker sex is broken by women in the novel. The paper adopts feminism as a theoretical framework to explore the ambivalence of the female power and prostitution. Deploying the qualitative method of analysis and the eco-critical method, the study explains the ambivalence of womanhood in the novel. The women's strength is visualised by their becoming a voice, sexually active, economically and independently successful, fearless, defending themselves from their oppressors, and consequently asserting their womanhood. The woman's weakness is viewed in their indulgence in prostitution for economic empowerment. The paper concludes that patriarchal forces push the women into prostitution but when the oppressed (women) are pushed to the wall, they have no other option but to revolt. Consequently, the radicalism in the novels is not only aimed at challenging patriarchal agents but to also raise the consciousness that women should be treated fairly and given equal opportunities.***

Keywords: Female Power, Prostitution, Ambivalence, Stereotype, Woman at Point Zero.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Woman at Point Zero projects a refreshing vision for twenty-first century African woman. The realities in post colonial Africa compel different women to device various strategies for survival. But the most affective force is patriarchy in which women are victims in all spheres of human endeavours.

…men force woman to sell their bodies at a price, and the lowest paid body is that of a wife. All women are prostitutes of one kind or another. Because I was intelligent I preferred to be a free prostitute, rather than an enslaved wife… (Saadawi 1983, p.91).

Due to the historical fact in many post colonial African communities that male education took precedence and wide recognition over female education, women were exposed to very minimal education or none at all. This trend implied that women also were hardly involved in significant socio-political and economic matters of modern societies where specialisation determined participation.

Women performed largely subsidiary and peripheral roles. But their major activities were domestic, natural and biological. Many African male literary writers have portrayed women in these roles and have been condemned by especially female critics for depicting prejudiced and distorted female image. Taking up the challenge of highlighting female potential in similar opportunities as men, women writers in Africa have made remarkable impact in the past few decades. In re-conceptualising African womanhood, they have broken the yoke of [female] voicelessness and are now speaking out (Kolawole 1997, p.197). They recognise Dangaremgba's assertion that:

This business of womanhood is a heavy burden…. Where there are sacrifices to be made, you [the woman] are the one who has to make them…. These things are not easy; you have to start learning them early, from a very early age. The earlier the better so that it is easy later on. Easy! As if it is ever easy… with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on another (Saadawi 1983, p.18).

Patriarchy is a widespread phenomenon that is not exclusive to a single nation or region. It is a system where men hold the subjective position as opposed to women, who are left at the mercy of men. According to Helen Chukwuma (2003):

The woman is a facile lackluster human being. The quiet member of a household…. She was not part of the decision-making both as a daughter, wife, and mother even when the decision affected her directly. Docility and complete sub-summation of will was demanded and enacted from her (p.219).

Chukwuma's position above shows the demeaning picture of the woman and the ploy by men through religion and culture to keep her down in the society.

2. RELATED WORKS

Female power and prostitution have been widely noted in African literature as many works have been written on this subject-matter. Women combine their female power and

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prostitution to survive in the African space and globally too. According to Smith (2015), "in literature the ambiguous portraiture of female characters by some male writers and the phallic nature of men writings have prove a matter of concern to female writers in Africa (p.26). To Renzo Baas (2019), "female subjectivities collectively answer the need to question and elaborate the possibilities of literary revisions, showing what it would mean to revise even the feminist psycoanalysist in a discourse on the subjectivity of woman of colour" (p.2017).
Bolat, E. (2022) has this to say: "Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's, Wanja and Nigerian writer Cyprian Ekwensi's Jagua Nana, who are the subject of this study, also make decisions that will change the course of the lives in the end and they begin to live by means of prostitution. Both characters choose this profession for separate purposes/reasons, however, the profession they want/have to do is the same" (p.29).
"Prostitution is perceived as a derogatory term for the occupations of women of low moral character surviving on unfettered deviancy" (Nwahunanya 2014, p.340).

3. METHODOLOGY

The paper adopts the qualitative and ecocritical method of analysis. It utilises the secondary data collection method using published works on Nawal El Saadawi's Woman At Point Zero to redefine the female power and prostitution as ambivalence in their nature. Content analysis is also used for studying the content of communication; to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within the texts or sets of texts used in this study. By so doing, explanation of the presence, meaning and relationship of such words and concepts are made with further inferences about the message within the text: Woman At Point Zero under review.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide an insight to what constitutes the ambivalence of female power and prostitution. It therefore follows that women provides both power and prostitution to make ends meet. Prostitution of women as an integral aspect of urban life has received the attention of many Nigerians other African writers. It is an integral component of social life in the city as the result of this study makes us to understand. Nawal El Saadawi, Nurudin Farah, Cyprian Ekwensi and many others in their texts on prostitution try to portray the profession as a debased, dehumanised and hazardous art (occupation, which unfortunately has be sustained under different guises by some depraved but highly placed individuals in the society.

Some of the prostitutes like Firdaus in Nawal El Saadawi's Woman At Point Zero and Jagua and Mama Nancy in Jagua Nana are economically independent women who have sufficient wealth and social connections to contemplate sending their younger boyfriends overseas for further studies. It is a shocking revelation of how brutally exploitative and internationalised the trade has become in the present century. On the other hand, this study reveals that African women are slotted when described by their main male counterparts in African literature as ravaged urban whores. In African literature, women are depicted as alluring and dangerous, and anarchic force in society to be disciplined by the assertion of male authority. In much of

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these writings, women tend to become symbols of societies in transition; they maybe use to represent a romantic golden age of traditional order, strong, submissive and elemental, or alternatively they are seen as symbols of urban decay and decadence: the grasping ghetto prostitutes vying with the sophisticated "been-to" for the chief resource available to them through men – money. Herein lies the ambivalence in woman nature – the combination of power and prostitution has made evident in the result of this study.

Female Power/Active Voice in the Novel

In the novel, Woman at Point Zero, the woman can become active and successful without necessarily depending on man. The novel could be viewed from the perspective of the narrative voice. In the novel, the attempt to give voice to the "subaltern" is explicitly linked to the question of narrative voice. Saadawi's retelling of the story of Firdaus allows the latter's voice to be heard even after her death and Firdaus' recounting of her own experiences in turn gives Saadawi the power and voice to critique the political, social, and economic ids of the Egyptian society in the context of gender which is at the same time a form of resistance to the ill treatment of women. It is however noted that women and others who resist patriarchy standards are silenced with death penalty.

The literary narrative retelling of those women's experiences by writers like El Saadawi…ensures that the resistant voices of the murdered women not only continue to be heard after death, but that their literary voices also become rallying cry for effective social change (Abulwaheed and Jujar, 2018, p.193).

In assessment, Nawal El Saadawi's corpus obviously represents' a feminist consciousness situated within the rather complex Egyptian social milieu in particular and the Arabo-Islamic world in general, exposing the ordeals of woman in her society and championing the cause of female emancipation. The oeuvre of El Saadawi plays a very important role in shaping and sharpening her perspective power, analytical acumen, and creativity. She uses her creative writing as a medium to unequivocally express the agonising ordeal of the woman in Arab society who, in an attempt to survive, desperately engages in very unusual acts. In other words, the novel could be viewed from the power of fiction at empowering the culturally "otherised".

The repression of women has been perpetuated over and over, more or less been unconsciously, and in a manner, that is frightening since it is often hidden or adorned with the mystifying "charms" of fiction. So, if fiction has been used for the repression of women overtime, it is now, for the empowerment and freedom of women as has been done by Nawal El Saadawi in Woman at Point Zero. Therefore, Saadawi deconstructively questions the "ethics of the phallocentric culture enshrined in the fictional world of Arab male authors". Here lies the ambivalence of Firdaus of power and prostitution. By focusing on the suppression of Firdaus' sexual identity, the abuse and violence meted on her and her subsequent triumph after killing her pimp, Saadawi gives voice and power to the hitherto voiceless and powerless Arab women and how the violence for violence is the only choice at the extreme of oppression.

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Throughout, woman, the protagonist is oppressed by a perverted moral paradigon, which severely limits her sexual identity, and at the same time condemns domestic violence and abuse…. As a child, she was brutally abused by a primitive circumcision ritual. In several occasions, Firdaus tries very hard to break this silence and transcend the wound but she fails. Paradoxically, she is able to discover her void and achieve an epiphany of self realisation only after killing her male abuser and oppressor. In this context, one can argue that in El Saadawi's fictional microcosm, female self-empowerment is fulfilled through counter-violence which enables the woman to liberate her body, both at a private and public space, from patriarchal domination (Gohar 2016, p.177).

In the novel, there are situations where other women oppress and exploit their fellow women, for instance, female genital mutilation is carried out by women. So, the women are doubly oppressed and molested firstly by their fellow women and then, men. Other instances abound in Firdaus' mistreatment by her uncle's wife who also exploits her sexuality by marrying Firdaus off to her greedy, sick and violent but rich uncle for a huge bride price; and Sharifa, the professional prostitute who introduces Firdaus to prostitution and benefits from it.
The underlying truth is that Firdaus sufferings in the hands of men are as a result of her oppression by women. According to Abdulwaheed, Talif, Ternizi and Jujar (2018), "all the traumatic experiences of the heroine (Firdaus) are brought to bear heavily on the heroine through the outrageous oppressive activities of the women" (p.210).

In Woman at Point Zero, female characters are in a complicated web in which the woman is entangled. She is to be continuously oppressed and exploited from different angles. The ambivalence of the women is further espoused such that even Sherifa who exploits Firdaus is a victim of male oppression. Thus, she ask Firdaus, "What did the son of dog do to you" having experienced the same treatment and knowing that such is the fate of the average woman in her society. Firdaus also discovers at her workplace that women are oppressed by men and are cheap, if no unpaid "harlots" even at the workplace. What this implies for Firdaus is that there is no decent place for women in her society; consequently, she resolves to go back to prostitution where she can make the money.

Female Prostitution in the Novel
This paper has tried to juxtapose the female strength: voice/power with the female weakness: prostitution in an attempt to bring to the fore the ambivalence of the nature of woman. According to Saadawi (1980), "prostitution started with the patriarchal system, with the division of society into land owners and slaves" (p.56).
In Woman at Point Zero, Firdaus grows in a large family with several brothers and sisters. The children of the family are intensely impoverished and malnourished. The deplorable living conditions of the family entail Firdaus' sleeping in the oven room, yet in the winter, her father displaces here and enjoys the warmth. She grows up in wife-battering home. Firdaus witnessed frequent scenes of her father beating her mother and then her step-mother. He "beats his wife and makes her bite the dust each night" (p.18). Unable to resolve the contradictions between the reality of her paternity and her expectation of her father, Firdaus questions her mother. Her mother is alarmed and suspects that Firdaus is attaining sexual

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consciousness, and as a result, she gets Firdaus circumcised, thereby compounding the schisms in Firdaus' mind. These developments force her into early adulthood and she quietly endures the sexual abuse from her uncle.

Firdaus at the age of nineteen years is forced into marriage with Sheikh Mahmoud, a widower who is over sixty years old. Sheikh Mahmoud consistently humiliates Firdaus; battering her, sometimes hitting her with his shoes. As a result she leaves the marriage, for the streets and ends up with Bayoumi. The same battering is seen in Bayoumi and Firdaus succeeds in escaping from his house and meets Sherifa, a professional prostitute who introduces her to formalised prostitution. She provides Firdaus with luxurious accommodation, feeding as well as men who have sex with Firdaus, but make payment to her, Sherifa. Sherifa trains Firdaus to extricate passion and all feelings from the business (of prostitution), but Firdaus finds that the business rather imprisons her.

Realising that while her vocation implies self-exploitation for her, it implies enrichment for Sherifa, she escape from Sherifa's home. She establishes herself at the age of twenty-five and discovers from one of her patrons, Di'as that prostitution and respectability are mutually exclusive. She becomes devastated realising her betrayal form Ibrahim whom she had married at her workplace. Ibrahim marries another woman; she leaves her job and goes along the streets again, and then returns to prostitution. She meets a pimp Marzouk who force himself on her, insisting on managing her and sharing in her earning: "Every prostitute has a pimp to protect her from other primps, and from the police. That's what I'm going to do. I'm in business. My capital is women's bodies and I don't mix work and love together (Saadawi 1982, p.92-93).
At the peak of Firdaus' sex work, she is conscious of men's deception and that all women are victims of deception. According to Firdaus:

A successful prostitute was better than a misled saint. 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 low, bind them in marriage and then chastise them with mental service for life, or insults, or blows (p.86).
In a disagreement with Marzouk, Firdaus uses Marzouk's knife and kills him. However, nemesis catches up with her as she hangs-out again in the streets spending the night with a wealthy Arab Prince who pays her a whooping sum of money in the morning; she abandons the business and now emboldened, she declares:
I am not a prostitute. But right from my early days my father, my uncle, my husband, all of them taught me to grow up as a prostitute…. I was the only woman who had torn the mask away, and exposed the face of their [the men's] ugly reality (Pp.99-100).

Firdaus' contentment and pride dispel from her any form of fear: "I have triumphed over both life and death because I no longer desire to live, nor do I any longer fear to die. I want nothing. I hope for nothing, therefore I am free (p.101).
It is clear from this exposition that the process of the psychological development of Firdaus results in her tenacious pursuit of peculiar ontological niches. Firdaus resorts to prostitution,

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the unconventional, unpopular and unacceptable option. Firdaus has a different beginning: has neither love nor proper nurture at childhood, neither protection nor counsel at adolescence, and consequently, she shoots prematurely into adulthood with a lattice of issues and values that she has to evaluate and appropriate. Firdaus typifies Gebremedhim's (2002) contention that "children living in home where the mother is abused are more likely to be abused themselves" (p.113).

Firdaus grows up to realise that she needs to take full possession and command of her body so as not to continue serving as a source of economic and sexual wellbeing of other people. From the reprehensible acts of Firdaus' father, uncle, husband, Bayoumi, Sherifa, Di'as Ibrahim, Marzouk to the numerous unnamed others, Firdaus. Major challenge is to redeem herself and her body. She is guided by Bammer's assertion that "our [female] bodies have been the nexus or the sphere of reproduction and production [in] the interlocking systems of economic and sexual exploitation within… [the] patriarchal culture" (p.153). From the reality that confronts women, it is clear that pursuits and goals of African leaders are puerile and their vision which is largely demented often times combine to drive the women to the incongruous. Thus, evidently, the woman's choice of prostitution cuts the leadership in Africa severely and mercilessly down to size, exposing its bestial tendencies through its insensitivity its nature of chasing shadows while the daily problems of women are ignored. Female prostitutes are conscious that while the contemporary leadership in Africa is biased against women, it connives with men to compromise in male favour`. In consequence, the vocation of female prostitution is an eloquent statement of protest against the systemic masochistic pleasure that prostitutes endure, as well as the neglect, mistreatment, discrimination and exclusion that they are subjected to. Female prostitutes articulate with bitterness the brutality they suffer in every sex act for which they are paid or denied their due.

5. CONCLUSION

Woman At Point Zero stresses how women are brutalised and marginalised by patriarchy, examines issues of gender inequality and perhaps strikes a balance between the sexes or even to replace masculinity. In its broadest meaning, the novel represents how women transcend the limit, exhibiting strong and assertive qualities [through the heroine, Firdaus] to show that they too are humans. Firdaus thus personifies woman liberation and empowerment of an archetype. The novel emphasises "The need for unity and understanding between women in the face of hostile forces: the ubiquitous "they"…. It records the workings of an agency that ensures survival, subversive hope, transformation, potential, and the surreal matter that cancels marginalisation" (Ogunyemi 2003, p.292).

Firdaus is destroyed by the end of the novel. In fact, her imprisonment and death represent the climax of a process to which Firdaus was subjected from infancy. She is a product of a loveless, malnourished family, cast in the rubric of squalor and sexual assault, and then she becomes a loner, roaming the streets in utter hopelessness. Firdaus solves the enigma of the weak and the victim "when it gradually dawns on her that woman can modify inexorable laws, even those of mathematics and the female/colonial condition" (Kolawole 1997, p.242).

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Just as the prevalent forces in society do not liberate Firdaus, despite her education and zeal, contemporary African women must face the challenge of harnessing all the resources available to them to battle to surmount class consciousness, which compels them to connive with men against other women. Firdaus fails as she attempts to be ambivalent: at one point hates prostitution; at the other loves it; hates men and loves them; challenges the patriarchal forces and another time accepts them, etc. This sit-on-the fence attitude culminates to her imprisonment and death; hence the ambivalence in her: success and failure and thus a Woman at Point Zero.

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