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Overcoming all Odds

What would you do if your whole life you were treated as only an object? Men using you only for your body with no care in the world. Egyptian author Nawal El Saadawi's novel, *Women at Point Zero*, dives into Firdaus's life as a woman who is trying to make it in a male dominated world. This novel shows the harsh reality of gender inequality and how women are used by men for their bodies. Firdaus's whole life has been this way with men, and even women, using her for their own gain. From her father, her mother, her uncle, lovers, and even Sharifa; they have used her for their own gain in life. This makes Firdaus feel as if she is nothing in this world but a puppet for others to use as they please. But soon, Firdaus will start to see the true power and beauty she has in her own life. Firdaus starts to see the value of her true self and takes control of her own life which allows her to start becoming more independent for herself. She no longer lets others bring her down or let herself hang her head low. She walks with her head held high with no one to tell her otherwise.

Even since Firdaus was born, she knew women were not treated the same as men. Men always have the upper hand in her life telling her how to live. Her father was one of the first men to have this power over her. Showing his power off by beating his wife and sometimes even his kids. Her father knew "how to beat his wife and make her bite the dust each night" (Saadawi 14). He did this because he knew just how much power he had over everyone in the house and because he was the man of the house. As long as he had the power, the house would be run the

way he wanted it to. He also didn't care about Firdaus and her sisters as much as her brothers. When one of his daughters would die, he wouldn't blink an eye. But when one of his sons would die, he would be so distraught over their death. Firdaus describes how when one of his female children died, "...he would go to sleep, just as he did every night," but when it was one of his boys, "he would beat my mother" than go to bed (Saadawi 23). Even at a young age, she knew how much more men were valued for than women. This impacts Firdaus view of her own self worth in the world. How can she do or go anywhere when men have all the power? What can a lone woman in the world do? Men after men, even women, keep using Firdaus for their own gain in the world. First her father, then her Uncle, and many more. Even men who she loves and was her lovers only manipulate her for her body. Her uncle sells her off to be with an old man, Bayoumi being nice in the beginning only to start beating her, and Sharifa using Firdaus to make herself money. All of these people use Firdaus how they see fit.

Firdaus finally starts to see how much power she can have in this world after a man pays her for sleeping with him for the first time. This triggers something in her to see the value in herself like she never had before. Firdaus talks about how "[i]t was as if he had lifted a veil from my eyes" (Saadawi 86) She finally realizes that she can have the same power men have over women for their bodies. Getting that bit of money from a man gave her the confidence she was always missing. With this newfound confidence, Firdaus starts to see herself in a new light where she has the power she always wanted. She now can see her own worth in the world and uses it to her advantage. Firdaus describes how holding the money "sent a strange tautness through my body, an inner contraction as though something had jumped inside me" (Saadawi 88). This feeling is something she has never felt before. A new feeling for a new start in her life. It makes her start to feel strong for the first time in her life. Never before has she realized just how much a

tiny piece of paper can make her feel so powerful. It has taken her years to see how this could forever change her life. This piece of paper could be the answer to all of her problems that she has had.

This small action of getting paid changes Firdaus's outlook on life. Tired of being used by everyone around her, Firdaus takes charge of her own life. She no longer wants to be a helpless woman with no control over her own body or her own life. No more will men, or even women, use her to put her down. She takes a stand in her new life to be more brave and more confident in herself. Firdaus describes how she "ceased to bend my head or to look away" anymore (Saadawi 91). This is significant to Firdaus because it allows her to finally see the value in herself and in her life. No more will she put her head down or look away when people look at her. This is a new beginning for her to have the life she always wanted growing up. She is not afraid to look up in life, to face everything that is ahead of her. Firdaus now has this new found empowering self to her that lets her see the value not only of her body, but her life as well. The feeling of the novel almost changes in a way as Firdaus starts to have a better outlook on her life. She is more independent than she has even been before in her life. No father, mother, lover, or men to tell her what to do.

Firdaus now can be free from the power that others have had over her for so long. No more will she feel small in the eyes of others. She has men begging her to be with them and now she gets to decide who she wants to be with. Firdaus in the beginning even talks about how she has "been searching for something that would fill me with pride" (Saadawi 13). This is the thing that is going to start filling her with the pride she always wanted. The pride to be her own woman who has the control of her own life and body. Men keep coming to her to ask to sleep with her and she turns some away. When one man asked her why she told him it's "[b]ecause there are

plenty of men and I want to choose with whom to go" (Saadawi 92). She gets to choose who she wants to go with or not. No long will men use her to their own free will as they see fit. She gets to decide what she wants to do with her own life and her own body now. If a man is not up to her standards, then she can choose to not be with him. Firdaus talks about how she can now "decide on the food I wanted to eat, the house I preferred to live in, refuse the man for whom I felt an aversion...and choose the man I wished to have " (Saadawi 93). Everything that was decided for her, she gets to decide now. Whatever clothes, house, food, and even men she wants is hers for the choosing. This new Firdaus has a lot more confidence in herself than ever before in her life. She is a tiger that has finally been let out of the cage. She has so much more confidence in herself that she even kills a man. She is no longer afraid of what is going to become of her because she can do anything a man can.

This moment in the novel really shows how hard Firdaus has wanted her life to be her own life, not one that someone tells her how to live. It challenges the theme of gender inequality of this novel with Firdaus overcoming the inequality and becoming independent. Women in that kind of society can't live on their own much less make money on their own. Firdaus describes how the kind of marriage "was the system built on the most cruel suffering for women" (Saadawi 118). It was made to make women suffer if they didn't follow the system. Women are told that they need to have a husband to take care of them to be able to live as the system tells them to. But, Firdaus overcomes this system and doesn't follow the rules. Firdaus is not only living in her own house that she owns, but is making her own money. She is challenging the social system by being her own woman with no man to provide for her. Firdaus is no longer letting men in her life tell her how to live or use her. This moment even gives her the confidence to kill a man. When killing the man, Firdaus asks herself the question, "why was it that I had never stabbed a man

before,” to which she answers, “I realized that I had been afraid” (Saadawi 130). She isn’t afraid anymore to go against the system that once held her down all her life. No other man will even hold her down to use her as they see fit. Firdaus isn’t scared to go to jail because she knows the true kind of power she has.

After this point in the novel, Firdaus has a much more tuff feeling and tone as she describes the later parts before going to jail. Her whole dynamic has made a 180 turn from the scared girl to the independent woman she is now. As said before, she no longer needs a man to take care of her or to use her. She has the free will she has always wanted to do as she wants in her life. Firdaus in the beginning of the novel makes a remake saying that she wants to “feel superior to everyone else, including kinds, princes, and rulers” (Saadawi 13). This is a foreshadowing to what happens to her at the end of the novel. She even makes men of higher power than her beg to be with her. The prince even offers so much money just to be able to be with her, but she doesn’t take it. She tells him that she is a princess that needs no man to be happy in life. She is taking the stand no matter the consequence to come. Firdaus knows what is going to happen as soon as she tells the prince she killed a man. She is making her point that even women can overcome a man's power.

Understanding the struggles women in Firdaus’s society face is important to understanding the changes she has gone through. She is not the same scared girl at the beginning of her story she tells. By the end, she is a fierce tiger ready to pounce on anyone who tries to get in her way. The harsh reality of gender inequality no longer affects Firdaus' outlook on her life. She now can see that she does have the power to overtake everything that comes her way, even men. That little piece of paper made a whole difference to her. She understands that she can use her own body as she wishes and pick who she wants to be with. If she doesn’t want to be with a

man, then she doesn't have to. This was the push that she always needed to become the independent strong woman she always wanted to be.

Works Cited

El Saadawi, Nawal. *Woman At Point Zero*. Zed Books, 2015.