



SAFARA

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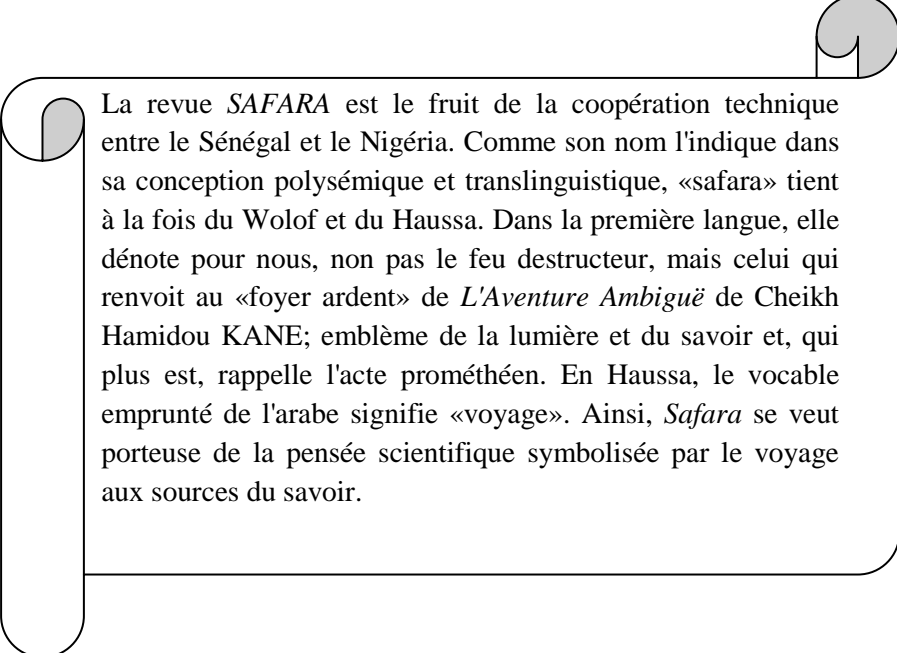
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La revue *SAFARA* est le fruit de la coopération technique entre le Sénégal et le Nigéria. Comme son nom l'indique dans sa conception polysémique et translinguistique, «safara» tient à la fois du Wolof et du Haussa. Dans la première langue, elle dénote pour nous, non pas le feu destructeur, mais celui qui renvoie au «foyer ardent» de *L'Aventure Ambiguë* de Cheikh Hamidou KANE; emblème de la lumière et du savoir et, qui plus est, rappelle l'acte prométhéen. En Haussa, le vocable emprunté de l'arabe signifie «voyage». Ainsi, *Safara* se veut porteuse de la pensée scientifique symbolisée par le voyage aux sources du savoir.

Sommaire

Beyond Point Zero: Reclaiming Agency in Nawal Al Saadawi's <i>Woman at Point Zero</i>	5
Oumar Cherif DIOP	
Misandry In Amma Darko's <i>The Housemaid</i>	15
Célestin GBAGUIDI	
Functions and Contexts of Reference Deviation in <i>Anthills of the Savannah</i>	31
Léonard A. KOUSSOUHAN and Yémal C. AMOUSSOU	
Murambi : un tombeau à ciel ouvert	53
Pierre GOMEZ	
L'écriture pleureuse dans <i>Lucy</i> de Jamaica Kincaid	71
Badara SALL	
Actorialisation et spatialisation comme motifs de l'écart et de la norme dans <i>Le paradis des chiots</i> et <i>Al Capone le Malien</i> de Sami Tchak	87
Pierre Ndemby MAMFOUMBY	
La Main sèche : Quête identitaire ou quête esthétique ?	97
Didier AMELA	
L'influence de l'autoritarisme religieux sur l'évolution psychologique des personnages à travers <i>La Religieuse</i> de Denis Diderot.....	109
Mahboubeh FAHIMKALAM and Mohammad Reza MOHSENI	
L'accès de la femme aux sphères de décision en Islam.....	123
Cheikhou DIOUF	
Using Games to Foster oral Communication in EFL Classrooms in the Republic of Benin	139
Estelle BANKOLE-MINAFLINOU	
Liberal Democracy and Governance in Africa: A Brief Critique	163
Aboubacar Abdullah SENGHORE	

Beyond Point Zero: Reclaiming Agency in Nawal Al Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*

Oumar Cherif Diop *

Abstract

Nawal Al Saadawi's Woman at Point Zero shows that oppression and exploitation produce destructive effects that cause psychological fragmentation. However, the traumatic experiences that result in the main protagonist's repeated regression into infancy also allow her to have a better sense of self amidst the workings of the patriarchal system. It is this newfound consciousness grounded in an understanding of the oppressive dynamics of the patriarchal system that eventually empowers and leads the main protagonist, Firdaus to point zero where she reclaims her agency.

Key-words: *agency, alethia, feminism, identification, ideology, misrecognition, being, patriarchy, point zero, truth, oppression, inexistent, event, situation, violence.*

Set against the backdrop of a patriarchal society, Nawal Al Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* is the saga of the stoic protagonist, Firdaus who, through her life-journey, grasps the dynamics of the exploitive patriarchal system and eventually confronts “ the multiple manifestations of her culture- punishing masculinities” (Royer 292). This paper focuses on how Firdaus reaches the newfound consciousness which empowers her, and leads her to point zero¹ where her attempt to reclaim agency results in her tragic death.

Firdaus's life has been charted by the phallogentric script that has made her submit to the dictum of patriarchal order, an order that has summoned her to surrender to the will of her male counterparts, and has coaxed her to entertain unattainable dreams of emotional fulfillment. The string of humiliations, abuses, and betrayals Firdaus goes through are “meted out by father, uncle, lover,

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¹ In an interview, El Sadaawi recalled that the invention of zero was a revolution in arithmetic science. She argued that point zero is the crucial moment when a revolution starts.

policeman, and political activist” thus, implicating “their associated institutions—familial, religious, political—and their sanctioned female violating structures” (Zucker 242). However, her trials and tribulations and her encounters with various breeds of predators make her aware of the dynamics of the patriarchal system. Hence she proclaims her ideological emancipation:

I hope for nothing
I want for nothing
I fear nothing
I am free (Saadawi 87).

The epistrophe “nothing” in Firdaus’s declaration is a sign that she has developed a better sense of what has happened to her. The patriarchal order instilled fear in her so that she would comply with its injunctions. Then it further enslaved her by determining her wants and desires. Her only hope to get out of the shackles of the male dominant society was to pursue ad infinitum a dream of recovering the lost maternal love through a number of substitutes: her attachment to her high school teacher, Ms Iqbal, her love for Ibrahim, and her relationship with Sharifa. Her realization that all these pursuits were in vain is well captured in her freedom proclamation.

Consequently, her level of awareness allows her to exit the confines of nothingness where she was held captive by man. Her freedom is therefore the prologue to her re-composition as a subject who can articulate *herstory*². From then on, Firdaus lives with the conviction to have recovered her integrity and honor as a woman (Saadawi 91), and her resolve to preserve them is unwavering. Thus, when Marzouk, the pimp appears to her as the quintessential male threat to her integrity, the agent of her schizophrenic *spaltung*³, Firdaus kills him in self-defense to

² Blend of *her* and *history*. First Known Use: 1970.

The Merriam Webster dictionary defines herstory as history considered or presented from a feminist viewpoint or with special attention to the experience of women.

³ The *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* edited by *Alain de Mijolla* (2002) defines *spaltung* as follows: "Splitting" (in French, "refente") is one of the translations Jacques Lacan proposed for the German "Spaltung" when he discussed how the subject is divided in subordination to the signifier. In 1958, at the end of *Les formations de l'inconscient* (1998), book 5 of his [seminar](#), Lacan introduced the written symbol to refer to the effects of the signifier on the subject. He proposed the French term "refente" some time later to translate

Beyond the Point Zero (Oumar Chérif DIOP)

preserve the wholeness of her recovered self. After that liberating act, Firdaus feels elated as she proclaims:

My body was light as a feather, as though its weight had been nothing more than the accumulation of fear over the years [...] my head held high to the heavens, with the pride of having destroyed all masks to reveal what is hidden behind (Saadawi 105).

Her footsteps on the asphalt, she describes as “footsteps of a woman who believed in herself, knew where she was going, and could see her goal” (Saadawi 105). And those confident resounding footsteps on the pavement “proved that she was nobody’s wife” (Saadawi 105). Marzouk’s death follows the unveiling and the confronting of the fears that patriarchy ingrained in her deep psyche.

When I killed I did it with truth not with a knife. That is why they are afraid and in a hurry to execute me. They do not fear my knife it is my truth which frightens them. This fearful truth gives me great strength. It protects me from fearing death, or life, or hunger, or nakedness, or destruction. It is this fearful truth which prevents me from fearing brutality of rulers and policemen (Saadawi 112).

Firdaus’s newfound truth seems to have liberated her from the fear of man that was ingrained in her subconscious by phallogocentric institutions. A number of critics argue that in order to achieve self-constitution and freedom, Firdaus needed to challenge the socio-cultural constitutions that used violence to frame her body as man’s property.

Amira Nouwaira (2009) argues that Firdaus’s truth has far-reaching consequences as she becomes the voice that “articulates the grievances of women, particularly those of the deprived, underprivileged classes, and their attempts to escape the nets flung at them by the entire society from the day they are born” (64).

Echoing Nouwaira, Irene Salami-Agunloye (2010) reads the novel as a subtle and radical “dismantling of male codes that disguise the Arab/Islamic culture.” The deconstruction of these codes, she further argues, is El Saadawi’s

the English term "splitting," itself a translation of the term employed by Freud, "Spaltung," which, in Lacan's view, indicated this same dimension. As early as 1953 Lacan emphasized an initial division "that precludes . . . any reference to totality in the individual."

way of challenging “the institutionalized patriarchal culture thereby undermining the dominant phallogocentric paradigm in the Arab/Islamic culture” (176). In the same vein, Eustache Palmer (2008) posits that Firdaus

aroused this animosity from officialdom and quarters because, in the words of Arndt, ‘she probed the oppression of women in Islamic societies and their deprivation of rights with a particular focus on the interplay between sexuality and violence’ and shed historic light on the situation of women in Islam and poke out diversely against the institutionalized circumcision and veiling women (150).

Analyzing the impact of Firdaus’s message, Diana Royer (2001) argues that Firdaus’s voice is linked with voices of eternity, disembodied voices that tell stories, speak truths (101).

However, none of these critics tells us what Firdaus’s truth really means with regard to her emancipation and how it fits into Saadawi’s feminist/revolutionary theory and praxis. Two additional questions that beg answers are: 1) does Firdaus reach point zero with the killing of the pimp? and 2) is her proclaimed truth consubstantial with that event?

The critics rather seem to suggest that Firdaus’s proclaimed truth is tantamount to the Heideggerian *alethia* that reveals how things are made intelligible. Furthermore, Firdaus’s *alethia*, the consciousness that allows her to denounce and indict, heralds the awakening and rebellion of those who have been duped, oppressed, and exploited for so long.

I contend that these romanticized readings of Firdaus’s revolutionary stance are amiss for two reasons: on the one hand, they do not factor in Saadawi’s critical analysis of women’s involvement in the political processes in the Arab world. On the other hand, they implicitly argue that Firdaus’s proclaimed truth harks back to Heideggerian *alethia*, an interpretation that overlooks Saadawi’s critique of the inherent flaws of the Arab feminist movement.

In *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1982), Nawal Al Saadawi points out that only women’s access to political power can change this undemocratic system based on violence in the Arab world. That change will enable Arab women to make constitutional reforms that will make the legal system less schizophrenic and less contradictory. However, the truth of the matter is that in spite of the increase in the numbers of educated professional women in various professional associations,

Beyond the Point Zero (Oumar Chérif DIOP)

political parties, and parliaments, no change has occurred. Women still constitute a marginal minority of less than eight percent in those associations. Besides, women are still confined in charitable cultural organizations but are not allowed to form a political force. It is illusory to consider any liberation of women from male tyrannical rule if women have no consciousness of their oppression and exploitation, no political organization, and no economic ability to organize.

Another pre-requisite to women's emancipation is correcting the distortion of their socio-historical consciousness which resulted from the falsification of history and the spurious glorification of a past that legitimizes their exclusion, oppression, and exploitation. Saadawi (1982) pertinently points out that "heritage is a tool which all present political forces use according to their interests and perspectives. Yet heritage loses its historical and human meaning if it does not represent all of society" (21). Saadawi argues that in the Arab world, women who represent fifty percent of the population are excluded from or made invisible in the struggle over heritage.

Based on Amira Nowaira's (2009) comments, it is also noteworthy to mention that El Saadawi departs from the early Arab feminists whose discourse generally reflected the preoccupations, views, and assumptions of the upper class (59). Even though these feminists protested against domestic violence, female circumcision, forced marriages, and polygamy, they were not concerned about the masses of uneducated women living in poverty-stricken rural and urban areas and the marginalized women of subclasses such as prostitutes. Challenging the compromises made by the early feminists, Nawal El Saadawi's stand confronts all the oppressive apparatuses, exploitive mechanisms, and dicta of the patriarchal system. Her works express empathy for lower classes and marginal groups while indicting irrevocably the male dominant system that dehumanizes women and pushes them towards prostitution. Saadawi's endorsement of the disenfranchised and the downtrodden is germane to her militant feminism that makes her embrace the prostitute as a human being while revealing and condemning unequivocally the conditions leading women to dehumanizing practices.

For Sadaawi, women's lack of political capital, their exclusion from the public sphere, their distorted historical consciousness and stolen heritage, the agenda and orientation of the elitist feminist movement contributed to making

women inexistent, to use Alain Badiou's term. With reference to the conceptual framework Badiou developed around the ontology of the *inexistent*, I will explore Firdaus's death/deadly truth and show how it departs from the Heideggerian *alethia* that seems to inform the commentaries of the aforementioned critics.

Badiou's (2009) ontology stipulates that *the being* [of disenfranchised people like Firdaus] *is to be an inexistent in the world*. [...] The multiple-thing is in the world but with an intensity equal zero. *Its existence is a non-existence* (58). [...] On the other hand Badiou argues that [...] "existence is a transcendental degree indicating the intensity of a multiplicity's appearing in a given world, and this intensity is in no way prescribed by the pure composition of the multiplicity under consideration" (58).

In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus experiences her status of inexistent through countless rejections and deprivations that are underscored, as I already mentioned, in *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1980). Inexistence, in Firdaus' case, is sealed by excision and symbolic violence, a form of violence that maintains its effect through the mis-recognition of power relations situated in the social matrix. Because of Firdaus's inexistence, this cycle of violence widens as it "winds outward from the home, to an uncle's home, a marriage, work as a secretary and finally a life of prostitution" (Zucker 242). Thus within the confines that "erase" them, women are not just at *degree zero*; they are below degree zero. As a case in point, Firdaus recalls: "When one of his female children died, my father would eat his supper, my mother would wash his legs, and then he would go to sleep, just as he did every night. When the child that died was a boy, he would beat my mother, then have his supper and lie down to sleep" (Saadawi 17).

For Firdaus's father, daughters were either objects to be bartered in marriage or domestics toiling and sweating from dawn to dusk. Only in her relationship to her mother would Firdaus ever hope to find affection. Unfortunately, even the warmth she sought from her mother's body was taken away by the father (Saadawi 16). She remembers that "instead of staying by my side to keep me warm, my mother used to abandon me alone and go to my father to keep him warm" (Saadawi 16). Also vivid in her memory are the summer months when "her father would have his legs washed by the mother" (Saadawi 16) and how as she grew older, her father placed the mug of water in her hands and taught her how to wash his legs. This traumatic erasure of the mother and subsequent

Beyond the Point Zero (Oumar Chérif DIOP)

replacement by the daughter was all the more acute as she recalls another woman hitting her on her hand and taking the mug away from her, and she remembers:

When I used to look into her eyes I could feel that she was not my mother.
They were not the eyes that held me up each time I was on the point of falling.
They were not two rings of pure white surrounding two circles of intense
black... (Saadawi 16-17).

The hatred that this woman harbors for Firdaus expresses her desire to slavishly satisfy the desire of the male master and subsequently submit to the process of symbolic identification⁴, a normatively circumscribed way of organizing the social space within which the subject's core and most enduring identity is constructed. As a case in point, Firdaus's mother and stepmother are identifying with the patriarchal way of structuring social relations between sexes. In the same vein, Firdaus's trials and tribulations underscore the fundamental aspect of Badiou's (2008) concept of inexistence that stipulates that "to inexist" is an existential distinction and, thereby, exclusively internal to appearing. The in-existent is simply that of which the self-identity is measured, in a given world, by the minimal degree (60). From such a minimal degree that is the hallmark of the saga in *Woman at Point Zero*, can Firdaus herald a truth that can subvert the patriarchal system?

According to Badiou, for the in-existent to be the harbinger of truth it has to fulfill a sine qua non condition: the attainment of a maximal degree of being in a given situation. The recent events that toppled Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt seem to confirm Badiou's point. The massive riots that occurred in these countries were the thunderous clamor of in-existent, marginal multiples entering forcibly the political arena.

Going back to the emergence of truth from the minimal degree of being, one has to acknowledge that truth emerges as a subversive force and an enduring regime only when, as a multiple, "it is introduced in some sort of supplementary

⁴ Elabourating on Lacan's distinction between symbolic and imaginary identification, Slavoj Žižek's (2009) posits: Imaginary identification is identification with the image in which we appear likeable to ourselves, with the image representing 'what we would like to be', and symbolic identification, identification with the very place from where we are being observed, from where we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves likeable, worthy of love (116).

way within the register of appearing” (76). In *Woman at Point Zero*, the set that Firdaus belongs to is the set of disenfranchised women who are victims of patriarchal rule. The key question is, however, whether Firdaus’s act of revolt is an event that reveals the truth about women’s conditions and, subsequently transmutes into a force that destabilizes the patriarchal system. I would argue that neither the level of consciousness that Firdaus attains through her life-journey nor her act of killing the pimp are cause for a local mutation that might have propelled women into the socio-political arena. Instead, her execution seems to further bracket her as an inexistent multiple. Firdaus’s tragically short-lived freedom is not the fulfillment of the ultimate liberation she could not attain in life as Amira Nouwaira suggests (70). Neither is her willful enactment of selfhood subverting the status quo. Instead I posit that, to a certain extent, a mutation process unfolds through the psychiatrist telling of Firdaus’s story. While revealing the trappings of the patriarchal system, Firdaus’s narrative stirs our feeling of sympathy for the victims and our revulsion for oppression. It is indeed Firdaus’s very act of speech that becomes her triumph over all adverse circumstances of her life (Nowaira 65).

In fine, one may wonder whether Firdaus succeeded in reclaiming agency. According to Badiou, the question of agency is not so much a question of how a subject can *initiate* an action in an autonomous manner, but rather how a subject *emerges* through an autonomous chain of actions within a changing situation. That is, not every day actions or decisions that provide evidence of agency for Badiou. It is rather those extraordinary decisions and actions which *isolate* an actor from their context, those actions which show that a human can actually be a free agent that supports *new* chains of actions and reactions. Furthermore, the real subject of truth is this new collective “we,” which comes to be precisely the point where the self is lacking: “The individual is thus, in his very essence, the nothing that must be dissipated in a *we-subject*”— a *we* that is itself immortal, eternal, and indifferent to any perishable nature or mortality (Hallward 122-3). The only way Firdaus fulfills such a requirement is by becoming a subject of enunciation, entrusting *herstory* to the psychiatrist. Thus, Firdaus’s sacrifice is not in vain. Her ultimate opposition to the rule of tyranny is an integral part of the legacy she bequeathed those who act in *fidelity*⁵ with a narrative which challenges the hegemonic patriarchal master-

⁵ adiou (2005) (1) defines fidelity as the procedure by means of which one discerns, in a situation, the multiple whose existence is linked to the name of the event (+) that has been put into circulation by an intervention (507). Fidelity distinguishes and gathers together the

Beyond the Point Zero (Oumar Chérif DIOP)

narrative. From degree zero of existence — as inexistent multiple — to point zero and beyond, Firdaus has become, in the words of Badiou, a subject transfigured by the truth she proclaims. By dissipating herself in a project that exceeds her, Firdaus contributes to the constitution of a true collective subject. Beyond point zero, Firdaus's voice joins the chorus that articulates the grievances of disenfranchised women and their attempts to emancipate themselves from oppressive phallogentric orders.

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