

The Body as a Site for Trauma and Memory in *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi

By

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Abstract

This paper examines Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* to show how it offers a powerful exploration of the female body as a site for trauma and memory. Through the experiences of Firdaus, a woman imprisoned for killing her pimp, the novel digs into the ways in which women's bodies are constructed, controlled, and exploited in patriarchal societies. The paper delves deeper into the manifestations of trauma depicted in the novel with emphasis on how Firdaus' body is utilised. Basing on Caruth's Trauma Studies, a critical look at trauma manifests in the novel is seen. Using close reading, this paper examines the female body as a central metaphor in *Woman at Point Zero* to shed a light on the complex relationship between trauma, gender, and power. The body is portrayed as a site for trauma through physical abuse, sexual exploitation and commodification. It is depicted as a site for memory through embodied experiences and scars. However, it is also used as a tool for resistance against patriarchal domination. These findings imply that the female body is symbol that captures the complexities of trauma, gender, and power within patriarchal societies. It serves as a powerful reminder of the resilience of the human spirit and the idea that a body can be used for challenging oppressive structures.

Keywords: Trauma, Memory, Resistance

Introduction

In recent years, the field of literary trauma studies has gained significant attention, exploring the presence and role of trauma in literature, film, and cultural-historical events (Balaev, 2014). This interdisciplinary approach has provided a new vocabulary and framework for understanding the complexities of trauma representation, particularly in the context of marginalized narratives. (Mendelson-Maoz, 2018).

Trauma is a conversation that needs to be held in all disciplines ranging from medicine, politics, to literature, among others. As defined by the American Psychiatric Association (2013), trauma captures the overwhelming response to distressing events that surpass an

individual's coping mechanisms. It can stem from a single calamitous incident, such as a natural disaster or a violent crime, or arise from prolonged exposure to stressful situations, such as sexual or childhood abuse or domestic violence. When trauma occurs, the body's nervous system becomes overwhelmed with stress hormones, leading to innumerable physical and emotional symptoms, including flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety, depression, and difficulty concentrating.

Pioneering scholars in trauma studies, like Judith Herman and Cathy Caruth, have laid the groundwork for comprehending the enduring psychological and physical ramifications of traumatic experiences. Herman's seminal work, "Trauma and Recovery" (1992), elucidated the characteristic features of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), while Caruth, in "Unworking Trauma" (1996), delved into the concept of "unworked" trauma – fragmented memories that defy traditional storytelling and persist unconsciously in the body and psyche. These frameworks underscore trauma's lasting impact on an individual's sense of safety and well-being.

Trauma literature, though not a distinct genre, serves as a significant category within literary studies, transcending conventional boundaries to explore the psychological and emotional aftermath of harrowing experiences (Cartotto 2017). This shared focus on trauma's enduring effects unites narratives across diverse genres, including historical novels depicting war, contemporary stories ransling with abuse, and personal memoirs recounting survival. Trauma literature delves deep into human experiences, offering varied perspectives on the lasting impact of trauma that surpass genre labels (Caruth, 1996).

Trauma, a deeply personal and disruptive experience, leaves permanent marks not only on the psyche but also on the body. While the psychological effects of trauma are well-documented in articles, journals and theses about war trauma, sexual violence and child abuse, the specificity of how the body is used is still lacking thus the study.

Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* offers a powerful exploration of the female body as a site for trauma and memory. The novel delves into the experiences of Firdaus, imprisoned for killing her pimp, who has endured a lifetime of physical and psychological abuse. Through Firdaus's narrative, El Saadawi exposes the ways in which the female body is constructed, controlled, and exploited in patriarchal societies.

Literature Review

According to Johnson and Connolly (2016), literature utilizes physicality as a metaphor for the psychological effects of trauma, with characters experiencing physical ailments and bodily transformations that reflect their internal struggles. The body itself becomes a canvas for these visual metaphors, its trembling hands and scarred skin bearing witness to the emotional scars of trauma (Schechner, 2013). Trauma can leave lasting physical marks on the body, such as scars or chronic pain (van der Kolk, 2014). In the article titled "Unsettling Trauma: The Body in Contemporary African American Drama" which explores how the body is utilized as a central motif for depicting trauma in contemporary African American drama, it argues that African American playwrights often employ the body as a site of resistance, resilience, and reclamation in the face of systemic oppression and historical trauma (Smith 2020). Through bodily gestures, movements, and physicality, characters in these plays navigate the complexities of race, identity, and trauma, reclaiming agency and asserting their humanity. Susan Brison (1999) argues that trauma can be difficult to articulate verbally, and the body becomes a site for expressing unspoken emotions. Similarly, Drew Leder (1990) suggests that the body can function as a "lived metaphor", where physical sensations and experiences stand in for complex emotions. These concepts provide a foundation for understanding how the body is used as a site for trauma and memory hence the study.

Majority of the available research on *Women at Point Zero* explores themes like gender-based violence, prostitution, the ambivalence of women's power, and resistance to violence (Suprpto & Setyorini, 2023). Whereas previous studies done by Balaa (2013), Ocholi et al (2020), among other have examined these aspects, the body as a site for trauma and memory has not been explored hence justification for this study.

Theoretical Framework

Trauma studies, emerging in the 1990s, explores the lasting impact of overwhelming experiences. Central to this field is the idea that trauma disrupts safety and control, leaving experiences fragmented and difficult to express verbally (Herman, 1992). Trauma studies emphasize the body as a site of trauma expression, with physical symptoms and movement disruptions potentially communicating unspoken emotions (Brison, 1999). The major tenets include identity, power dynamics, healing and recovery, memory and forgetting. A strength lies in its ability to illuminate the complexities of post-traumatic experiences, offering a

framework for understanding how individuals cope with trauma. However, critics argue that the focus on the unrepresentable nature of trauma can overlook survivor resilience and agency (Balaev, 2018). Additionally, the emphasis on individual experience can obscure social and political contexts that contribute to trauma (Caruth, 1996). Despite these limitations, trauma studies provide valuable insights into trauma's enduring impact, prompting further exploration of its manifestation.

Literary Methods

This qualitative study which explores experiences, meanings, and social phenomena through methods like interviews, focus groups, ethnography, and document analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) was used to analyse the novel at hand which was selected purposively for its richness in the human trauma triggering experiences lived. Textual analysis was used to highlight the underlying trauma issues and how the body has been used as a site for trauma and memory (Lazarus, 2009). Close reading was mainly used as the method of data analysis as it delves deeper than simply understanding the plot or surface meaning, focusing on the specific details and techniques employed by the author to create meaning (Tyson, 2006).

Discussion

The Female Body as a Site of Trauma

Firstly, the novel offers a disturbing depiction of the physical abuse endured by Firdaus, the novel's protagonist. Throughout her life, Firdaus is subjected to relentless violence (Thampy 2021). From an early age, she is beaten quite often by her father. Later, when she is forced into marriage, her husband Sheikh Mahmoud beats her up at any slight mistake. Once beaten, she runs to her uncle's home, only to be taken back with a clear explanation that all husbands are allowed to beat their wives. She states,

"One day he hit me with his heavy stick until the blood ran from my nose and ears. So, I left, but this time I did not go to my uncle's house." (page 47).

This quote shows that Firdaus has endured physical beating from her husband multiple times. After running away from her marital home, she takes refuge at Boyoumi's place. He also beats her up severely when she attempts to ask for a job. Later when she meets Marzouk, her pimp, she is still physically beaten and raped. These physical experiences from all men

around her highlight the systemic nature of gender-based violence in patriarchal societies (Jebakumari 2024). Firdaus' body becomes immune to pain got from beating. Whether the pain heals, she still carries around the trauma from physical abuse. It is no wonder she spits at pictures of men in the newspapers. The novel suggests that the female body is often seen as punchbag for men.

Secondly, the novel paints a rather disturbing portrayal of the sexual exploitation faced by Firdaus. Firdaus is exposed to sex at quite a young age by Mohammadain in the fields as she plays with other children. She is also molested by her uncle, raped by her husband, Bayoumi and his friends (Abdullah, et al 2015). Her early experiences of sexual abuse force her into prostitution. As a prostitute, she sleeps with countless men and describes them as heavy, sweaty and smelly. She doesn't feel anything except for pain. She often wonders whether her body and herself are one;

'How many were the years of my life that went by before my body and myself became really mine' (1975:74)

This quote implies that so much time has passed without Firdaus feeling like herself. Even as a high-end prostitute, she is still exploited first by Ibrahim who refuses to marry her but continues to ask for free sex and Marzouk, a pimp who controls her finances and also sleeps with her for free. Firdaus's experiences highlight the power imbalances that exist between men and women, and the ways in which women can be forced into situations of sexual exploitation even at formal work places. When pursued for sex at work, she states;

"I quietly replied, 'The price of my body is much higher than the price that can be paid for it with a pay rise.'" (page 81)

From the above quote, Firdaus clearly says no to sexual exploitation even when it means not being able to attain a pay rise. Therefore, the female body is used both a tool for exploitation and elevation.

The novel also depicts trauma through female genital mutilation. Firdaus' mother performs a clitoridectomy on her and later not allowed to play with children in the maize stalk shelter in the fields. Before this act, Firdaus is able to feel pleasure. She says;

‘From some part in my body, where exactly I did not know, would come a sensation of sharp pleasure’ (12).

This quote illustrates that before mutilating her, she is able to feel pleasure. However, after the act, she can no longer feel anything. She states;

‘I no longer felt the strong sensation of pleasure that radiated from an unknown and yet familiar part of my body... as though a part of me, was gone and would never return’ (pg. 13)

Because of this act, Firdaus body has forgotten the feeling of sexual pleasure. Later on in the novel after Ibrahim breaks her heart, she mentions that, *‘I offered men only my outer shell...I kept my heart and soul...my body played a passive role (pg. 93).* The pain is exceedingly high that she says it is much deeper than selling her body. Therefore, her experiences of physical abuse demonstrate how trauma is inscribed onto the body (Herman 1992).

Finally, the novel highlights how patriarchal structures view and utilize the female body as a commodity. Firdaus's body is commodified and objectified, reinforcing patriarchal power dynamics (MacKinnon 1989). In the first instance, Firdaus' uncle and his wife discuss how marrying her to old Sheikh Mahmoud would fetch a big dowry and could be her only chance of getting a man given her physical appearance. She states;

‘..this is her best chance to get married. Do not forget what a nose she has. Its big and ugly like a tiny mug. Besides, she has inherited nothing and has no income of her own. We will never find a better husband for her than sheikh Mahmoud. (pg 38).

This quote implies that a woman like Firdaus who isn't physically appealing and wealthy can only do well for herself once married off. Her appearance is used as a leverage in getting her married to a man 40 years her senior. Additionally, Firdaus's experiences in prostitution further this notion, where her body is treated as an object to be bought and sold, devoid of agency or respect (Balaa 2013). Sharif and Marzouk make a lot of money off Firdaus. Marzouk bluntly tells her that his capital is women's bodies. This commodification reinforces her sense of worthlessness and perpetuates the cycle of trauma.

The Body as a Site for Memory

Firstly, the novel offers a powerful exploration of the embodied experiences of trauma. Firdaus's body remembers traumatic events, even when her mind tries to forget. On several occasions, Firdaus' body remembers traumatic events as it reacts quite similarly. When she is seated in the darkness waiting to talk to Ibrahim after hearing about his engagement to the Chairman's daughter, her body reiterates a similar feeling of when she waits to say goodbye to Iqbal her secondary school teacher. She starts to cry out of nowhere on both incidents communicating that once she is with comfortable with someone, her body lets loose and she is able to feel all the pain, anxiety and many other feelings. She narrates, '*...my heart beat wildly, the blood started pounding through my chest, up to my head*' (pg. 92). This same feeling is got by Firdaus when she runs away from her uncle's home, her marital home and Bayoumi's home. This embodied experience of trauma resonates with the work of trauma theorists, who argue that traumatic memories are stored in the body (Van der Kolk, 2014).

Secondly, Firdaus's physical body is marked by the permanent scars of violence and abuse. These scars serve as constant reminders of her past suffering, but they also represent her strength and survival. She has a bruised and scarred body after the beating she gets from Sheikh Mahmoud. She says that,

'The imprint of my husband's shoe was still there on my body' (pg. 100).

This quote is made when she is asked about getting remarried and she refuses to even consider the idea citing domestic violence. Firdaus's scars serve as physical reminders of her traumatic experiences. These scars symbolize the lasting impact of trauma on Firdaus's life and identity (Briere & Elliott 2003).

However, Firdaus's body also becomes a site of resistance against patriarchal oppression. Through her struggles for bodily autonomy, Firdaus challenges societal expectations and norms. She refuses to accept traditional feminine norms and instead embraces her own desires and agency (Hooks 1994). Firdaus's journey toward bodily autonomy empowers her, illustrating the importance of self-control and agency in overcoming trauma (Herman 1992). Throughout the novel, she struggles to gain control over her own body, which has been controlled by all men around her, women too. She realizes that by using her body in unconventional ways, she can gain more power than women who conform to traditional gender roles. She says;

“I was not a prostitute in the full sense of the word, so from time to time I said no. As a result, my price kept going up. A man cannot stand being rejected by a woman, because deep down inside he feels a rejection of himself. No one can stand this double rejection. And so, every time I said no, the man would insist. No matter how high I raised the price he could not stand being refused by a woman.” (page 97)

From this quote, Firdaus clearly shows her body is her own even when used in ways other people could frown upon. It is seen as her only tool to resist patriarchal domination. Her final act of stabbing Marzouk in different parts of the body can be interpreted as a refusal to be defined by the trauma inflicted upon her body but rather on abuser's body. Firdaus' descent into violence is not only a response to the dehumanization she has endured, but also a desperate attempt to reclaim her sense of self and assert her right to exist on her own terms (Dalley, 2015).

Conclusion

Woman at Point Zero is a powerful and disturbing exploration of the female body as a site for trauma and memory. The novel illustrates how female bodies are viewed, and exploited in patriarchal societies. The body is portrayed as a site for trauma through physical abuse, female genital mutilation, sexual exploitation and commodification. It is depicted as a tool for memory through the scars and embodied experiences. However, the same body is used to resist dominant patriarchal structures of tradition and religion. Therefore, by examining the body of Firdaus, the novel challenges traditional notions of femininity and offers a vision of female empowerment.

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