

Woman at Point Zero Study Guide

Woman at Point Zero by Nawal el-Saadawi

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Plot Summary

Woman at Point Zero by Nawal El Saadawi is an engrossing, dramatized non-fiction work about the life of Firdaus, an Egyptian woman sentenced to death for killing a man. After suffering greatly at the hands of men through her entire life, Firdaus becomes a prostitute, but she is imprisoned for killing a pimp who beats and rapes her. "Woman at Point Zero" is a heart wrenching tale that readers will find hard to put down.

In 1973, Nawal El Saadawi hears about Firdaus, a woman who has been sentenced to death for killing a man, from her doctor friend at Qanatire Prison. At first, Firdaus refuses to meet Saadawi, but she eventually agrees to tell the story of her life.

As a child, Firdaus lives with her parents. She receives pleasure from Mohammadain but stops feeling pleasure after her mother cuts off her clitoris, though Firdaus' uncle still touches her. Firdaus does not understand who she, her mother or father is. She often goes hungry while her father eats. After her father dies, her uncle puts her in elementary school, and he takes her to live with him in Cairo after her mother dies. Firdaus likes school, and after she receives her primary school certificate, a strange thing happens to her as pleasure reawakens in her body. When her uncle marries, she is sent to the boarding section of the school, and she likes school and dreams about her hopes for the future. In her despair one night, she is comforted by and falls in love with Miss Iqbal, but she never sees her after receiving her secondary school certificate and returning to live with her uncle.

Firdaus' uncle's wife convinces him to marry Firdaus off to Sheikh Mahmoud, an old man who beats Firdaus. When Firdaus runs away from Sheikh Mahmoud, she lives peacefully and happily with Bayoumi until he begins to beat her and locks her up in his flat so that he and his friends can use her sexually. After escaping from Bayoumi, Firdaus is taken in by Sharifa Salah el Dine who acts as her pimp until Fawzy, a client, wants to marry Firdaus and beats and rapes Sharifa when she refuses. Seeing this, Firdaus runs away yet again, but now, she gets her own apartment and prospers financially as a prostitute until Di'aa tells her that she is not a respectable woman. She gets a job at a big industrial operation where she has an affair and falls in love with Ibrahim, but she returns to prostitution when she learns that Ibrahim is engaged to the chairman's daughter.

Firdaus learns the truth: that all women are victims of deception, but prostitutes are less deceived than other women. She chooses the men she will bed and becomes very successful, being paid the highest price. This changes when Marzouk, a pimp, forces Firdaus to pay him most of her earnings in exchange for protection, though he beats and rapes her. When he tries to prevent Firdaus from leaving, Firdaus stabs Marzouk. After bedding an Arab prince, Firdaus confesses to killing a man, and she is imprisoned and sentenced to death because she knows the truth and is free because she no longer wants, hopes or fears anything. The journey to a place unknown to the world fills Firdaus with pride. After she finishes her story about her life, she is taken to her execution. As Nawal El Saadawi returns to her car, she sees the lies and hypocrisy of

the world. Although she wants to stamp it all out, she is too frightened, and she realizes that Firdaus has more courage than she does.



Author's Preface

Author's Preface Summary and Analysis

Woman at Point Zero by Nawal El Saadawi is an engrossing, dramatized non-fiction work about the life of Firdaus, an Egyptian woman sentenced to death for killing a man. After suffering greatly at the hands of men through her entire life, Firdaus becomes a prostitute, but she is imprisoned for killing a pimp who beats and rapes her. Woman at Point Zero is a heart wrenching tale that readers will find hard to put down.

Nawal El Saadawi writes this novel after an encounter with a woman in the Qanatir Prison. In 1972, Saadawi is removed as Director of Health Education and Editor-in-Chief of "Health" magazine as a result of her feminist views, which are viewed unfavorably by the authorities. This gives her more time to think, write and research. A new stage of her life evolves in 1973 and sees the birth of this novel, Firdaus, or Woman at Point Zero. Saadawi decides to research the case studies of women suffering from neurosis in Egypt. She has always been attracted to the idea of prison, likely because many prominent intellectuals, including her husband, have been imprisoned for political offenses. Saadawi meets and exchanges ideas with one of the doctors from the women's prison in Qanatir, and she becomes more interested in prison, especially when the doctor tells her about a woman who has been sentenced to death for killing a man. The doctor arranges for Saadawi, as a psychiatrist, to meet this woman and other female prisoners who suffer from mental afflictions.

When Saadawi arrives at the prison, she is immediately overwhelmed by the gloom, and she has no idea that she will return in 1981 as a prisoner. At first, Firdaus refuses to meet with Saadawi, but eventually she meets the psychiatrist and shares her whole, terrible but wonderful story. Saadawi develops admiration for Firdaus and eventually writes her story as a novel. For the time being, Saadawi focuses on her twenty case studies and publishes "Women and Neurosis in Egypt" in 1976. Firdaus stands out, and though she is executed at the end of 1974 and Saadawi never sees her again, Firdaus is always before Saadawi's eyes. When Saadawi is imprisoned in 1981, she tries to catch a glimpse of Firdaus in the other prisoners because she cannot believe Firdaus really died. Though she meets some women who remind her of Firdaus, Firdaus remains unique by her "absolute refusal to live, her absolute fearlessness of death", and "Firdaus is the story of a woman driven by despair to the darkest of ends" (p. iii). She evokes in those who witness her final moments, like Saadawi, a need to challenge and overcome the forces that deprive humans of the right to live, love and truly experience freedom.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

Saadawi tells the story of a real woman she met several years earlier at Qanatir Prison while doing research on the personalities of a group of female prisoners. The doctor at the prison tells her about a woman sentenced to death for killing a man and agrees to try to convince her to speak to Saadawi.

Firdaus is unlike other female murderers as she refuses to see visitors or answer the doctor's questions; she will not even sign an appeal to reduce her sentence to life imprisonment which the doctor made out for her because he does not feel she is a murderer since her eyes are so gentle. The doctor tries to convince Firdaus to see Saadawi, but she refuses.

Saadawi goes home but can think of nothing but Firdaus. When Saadawi asks the warder to see Firdaus the next day, the warder tells her to leave Firdaus alone because she will never agree to see Saadawi. She further states that Firdaus is an innocent woman and does not deserve to hang. Saadawi returns to the prison several times in vain, and her confidence is shaken by the rejection of Firdaus' refusal to see her.

As she heads toward her car with the intention of leaving, she begins to rebuild her self-esteem, thinking that a woman condemned to death cannot possibly be better than her, a psychiatrist. Suddenly, the warder chases Saadawi to the parking lot because Firdaus has agreed to see her. Saadawi feels proud though she is out of breath. She catches her breath outside Firdaus' cell, and her inside voice asks "Who is this woman called Firdaus? She is only..." (p. 6), but the words are stopped short when she finds herself face-to-face with Firdaus. It is as though Saadawi dies the moment that she meets Firdaus' eyes, eyes that kill.

Firdaus tells Saadawi to close the window, and Saadawi complies. She sees that there is nowhere to sit, but Firdaus instructs her to sit on the ground. Though the ground is cold, Saadawi does not feel the cold. Firdaus' voice has a dream-like quality, but this is no dream; Firdaus is a real woman, and the real voice can only be Firdaus' voice in this enclosed cell.



Chapter 2, pages 11-19

Chapter 2, pages 11-19 Summary and Analysis

Firdaus instructs Saadawi not to interrupt her because she does not have much time; she will no longer be here tomorrow morning. The journey to an unknown place fills her with a pride that she has been searching for her entire life in order to make her feel superior to everyone else. She always spits on the pictures of men in newspapers, though she does not know them, as no single woman can know all of the men in newspapers.

Firdaus was a successful prostitute, and every man fills her with the desire to strike him, though she never had the courage because she is a woman. Because she is a prostitute, she hides this fear under layers of expensive make-up. Her make-up, hair and shoes are upper-class, while her secondary school certificate and suppressed desires designate her as middle-class, but she was born to the lower-class.

As Firdaus shares her memories, she states that her father is an illiterate, poor, peasant farmer, and every Friday, he joins the other men at mosque. Afterward, she watches the men, including her father, praise the imam's eloquence as she carries a heavy, earthenware jar on her head, and sometimes, she cannot distinguish her father from the other men. One day, she asks her mother how she was born without a father. Her mother beats her, and the next day, she and another woman cut off Firdaus' clitoris.

Her mother stops sending her to the field where she played "bride and bridegroom" with Mohammadain, a little boy who gave Firdaus pleasure by rubbing between her legs. Instead, Firdaus cares for the animals and kneads the bread on baking days. Often, while she kneads the bread, her uncle reaches under her galabeya and touches her how Mohammadain used to, but she no longer feels pleasure, as though a part of her being is gone and will never return.

Uncle is much older than Firdaus, and he attends classes at El Azhar in Cairo while she is a child and teaches her to read and write on the holidays. When he returns to school, Firdaus accompanies him to the Delta Railway Station and begs him to take her to Cairo with him so that she can study at El Azhar, but he laughs because El Azhar is a school for men only. Firdaus returns to her father's house with her head bent, pondering who she is and how she will spend her life.

Firdaus stares at the walls like a stranger and wonders if her mother changed into another woman who so closely resembled her that Firdaus could not tell the difference. She recalls the first time she saw her mother and remembers her eyes in particular which seemed to hold her up as she fell while trying to learn to walk. As a child, Firdaus sought warmth from her mother's body, but at night, her mother would abandon her to keep her father warm.



When Firdaus grew a little older, her father taught her to wash his legs, replacing her mother, but instead of her mother, another woman is there, one who hits her and takes the mug away. This woman looks exactly like Firdaus' mother, but her eyes are different; they appear blacker every time Firdaus looks at them, as if the light never touches this woman's eyes. Firdaus weeps quietly at night to avoid waking her brothers and sisters.

Like most people, she has many siblings who multiply in the spring and die from diarrhea in the summer. Her father follows his normal supper routine if a female child dies, but when a male child dies, he beats his wife before eating. Regardless, Firdaus' father always eats his supper, and even if there is no food for his wife and children, he eats alone while they watch. Once, he strikes Firdaus for daring to stretch her hand toward his plate when she is hungry. After he eats, his wife brings him a glass of water, he smokes a water pipe and goes to sleep.

Firdaus senses that he is not really her father, but she keeps the secret to herself. When her uncle visits, she always begs him to take her with him because she is closer to her uncle than her father. Uncle teaches her the alphabet and sends her to elementary school after her father dies, and when her mother dies, he takes her to Cairo to live with him.



Chapter 2, pages 20-30

Chapter 2, pages 20-30 Summary and Analysis

Firdaus has the feeling of being born a second time as she enters her uncle's house and sees herself in the mirror for the first time, but she dislikes her image and develops a deep hatred for the mirror. She enjoys school and tends to her uncle's house afterward. During the cold winter nights, she curls into his arms for warmth, and she wants to tell him that she loves him, but is unable.

When Firdaus is awarded her primary school certificate, her uncle gives her a wristwatch and takes her to the theater where she sees a woman dancing with naked thighs and another woman kissing a man on the lips. Her uncle tells her these are sins, but a strange thing happens to Firdaus; somewhere in her body, an old pleasure, or a new pleasure still unknown, awakens.

Her uncle becomes a different man, acquiring a position in the Ministry of Wakfs and marrying an indifferent woman who he treats with courtesy rather than love. He hires a small servant girl who sleeps on the floor of Firdaus' bedroom, and his wife beats both girls when she finds them sharing the bed for warmth.

One day, Firdaus' uncle and his wife seem very angry at Firdaus, and they send her to the prison-like boarding section of her school. Firdaus still loves school, and Wafeya, her friend, has a bed next to hers. They often move their beds together at night so Wafeya can talk about her cousin with whom she is in love and Firdaus can talk about her hopes for the future. One day, the school joins a demonstration against the government, and that night, Firdaus imagines herself as a great leader or head of state though that is impossible for a woman, but she feels that she is unlike other women because their conversations about men and love seem trivial to her.

Though the days and nights at school are long, Firdaus develops a love for books and reads about many rulers who are all men with avaricious and distorted personalities. When she tires of reading history, she goes to the playground and contemplates her future. One night, Miss Iqbal, a teacher at the school, joins Firdaus and comforts her as she cries for some unknown reason. Miss Iqbal denies crying, though Firdaus sees two tears slide down her face. The night is deep, silent and motionless as Firdaus gazes into Miss Iqbal's eyes and holds her hand, which feels strange and makes her body rumble with a distant pleasure. A memory comes to mind, but Firdaus is unable to voice it because it falls away as soon as she recalls it. Her heart is frightened over "something precious *she* was on the point of losing, or had just lost, forever" (p. 30). Firdaus' fingers cling to Miss Iqbal's hand with such violence that no force on earth could tear them apart.



Chapter 2: pages 30-42

Chapter 2: pages 30-42 Summary and Analysis

After that night with Miss Iqbal, Firdaus wants to talk to her, but Miss Iqbal treats her like the other students. At night, Firdaus wonders if she has forgotten, but when she tries to explain what happened to Wafeya, there is nothing to talk about. She tries to recall the scene until the images become confused and she cannot distinguish between the faces of her mother, father, uncle, Wafeya, Mohammadain and Miss Iqbal. When Wafeya asks if she is in love with Miss Iqbal, Firdaus says that is impossible because Miss Iqbal is a woman.

Firdaus studies hard during the few days before her final exams, but when her name is called at the completion ceremony, she is unable to move to collect her secondary school certificate. Miss Iqbal takes Firdaus by the hand and signs for the certificate. By the time the school year ends and Firdaus' uncle arrives to collect her, she has not seen Miss Iqbal since the night of the ceremony; she had spent the night of the ceremony on the playground, thinking Miss Iqbal would come, but she was wrong. Firdaus follows her uncle from the school, looking behind her in vain for a sight of Miss Iqbal.

After Firdaus returns to her uncle's house, she hears his wife say that Firdaus cannot stay with them and suggest sending Firdaus to the university, but Firdaus' uncle refuses to send his niece off to mix in the company of men. His wife suggests marrying Firdaus to her uncle, Sheikh Mahmoud, convinces her husband that Sheikh Mahmoud is not too old for Firdaus, and discusses the potential for a large dowry; she claims Firdaus will be fortunate if Sheikh Mahmoud agrees to marry her, and Firdaus' uncle and his wife give thanks to Allah. Firdaus hears them kiss and make love despite her aunt's protests. Her breathing strains with theirs and regains normality with theirs, and she falls to sleep in a pool of sweat.

The next morning, Firdaus cooks breakfast for her uncle and avoids his gaze. When he leaves for work, she packs but is interrupted by Hala, her youngest cousin, who keeps calling her name, but Firdaus promises to come back, gives Hala a picture of herself to keep her occupied and runs from the flat with her suitcase full of belongings. Firdaus feels different as she walks down the street, and it is as if a new world is opening up before her. She is amazed at the large number of people on the street, but she is non-existent to the people who pass her when she rests against a wall as she is unable to find a place to sleep by nightfall. Firdaus feels two eyes moving slowly toward her, gazing from her shoes upward to her eyes, and she is overcome with a feeling of terror throughout her entire body. She moves away from the eyes and hides among the crowd. After ensuring that the eyes are gone, Firdaus runs to her uncle's house as fast as possible.



Chapter 2, pages 42-54

Chapter 2, pages 42-54 Summary and Analysis

Firdaus is only able to put up with her life at her uncle and Sheikh Mahmoud's houses out of fear of the eyes in the street. When she marries Sheikh Mahmoud, he wraps his body around her at night, and she washes vigorously once he finishes with her body. He begrudges her every scrap of food and begins beating her when she throws food away. Firdaus runs away to her uncle's house, but he takes her back to Sheikh Mahmoud immediately because all husbands beat their wives.

Back at her husband's house, Firdaus is beaten but yields submissively; however, when Sheikh Mahmoud beats her with a stick the next day, she runs away to the street. When she stops at a coffee-house to beg for water, Bayoumi, the owner, invites Firdaus to live with him and promises to help her find work since she has a secondary school certificate. At Bayoumi's insistence, Firdaus sleeps in his bed through the winter and the following summer, and he never strikes her or begrudges her food. When Firdaus complains that he has not tried to find her work, Bayoumi beats her and locks her in his flat. Bayoumi and his friends rape Firdaus and call her derogatory names until a neighbor helps her escape from the flat.

At the end of the day, as Firdaus sits on a stone bench facing the river, a woman named Sharifa Salah el Dine invites her home, and Firdaus explains everything that happened to her. Sharifa bathes and clothes Firdaus, who feels like she has been born again. Sharifa advises Firdaus that she must know her own worth for a man to recognize her worth, and she warns her that it is necessary to be harder than life or life will devour her.



Chapter 2, pages 54-67

Chapter 2, pages 54-67 Summary and Analysis

As Firdaus becomes a novice in Sharifa's hands, Sharifa opens Firdaus' eyes to the events in her past that had remained hidden from her eyes, and she claims that men did not know Firdaus' worth because she did not value herself highly enough. It will be Sharifa's affair to ask men for a price.

Firdaus watches the Nile from her window every morning, and the moonbeams flow over her as gentle, clean men make love to her. The pleasure that she feels ends in a pain that feels like pleasure and seems to belong to a time long ago and the body of someone else. The comfort at Sharifa's ceases to exist for Firdaus as she never leaves the bedroom and many men visit at every hour. When they ask if she feels good, she wants to spit in their faces. One man, Fawzy, realizes that she feels pain because he can feel her, but she cannot feel him since "Sharifa told me work is work, and that feelings do not come in where work is concerned" (p. 58). Fawzy informs Firdaus that Sharifa is making money off her, and while Firdaus sleeps, he argues with Sharifa about taking Firdaus to marry her since he wants a son. Firdaus wakes and hears their argument escalate to the point of Fawzy beating and raping Sharifa.

Firdaus dresses and hurries through the bitter cold streets in her thin dress, laughing as she recalls a man praising her long, slender fingers. A policeman forces her to have sex with him, threatening to arrest her if she refuses because he knows she is a prostitute, but he refuses to pay her. When she returns to the streets as the rain begins to fall, a man in a car propositions Firdaus and takes her to his warm house and bed. The next morning, he hands her a ten pound note, which reminds her of the first time her father gave her a piaster to buy sweets, but this is the first time Firdaus has ever held such a large note in her hands.

She goes to a restaurant and buys a chicken to eat as she meditates upon the sweetness of possessing her own money. The waiter's eyes do not linger on her plate, and she realizes this is the first time in her life she has eaten without someone watching. Realizing the difference that money makes, Firdaus notices the waiter looking away from her money at the same time that he watches it from the corner of his eye. She nearly asks him who has decided money was forbidden to whom and for whom it was permissible, but instead, she hands him the note, which he accepts with his head bent down and his eyes seeming to stray far away.



Chapter 2, pages 67-77

Chapter 2, pages 67-77 Summary and Analysis

After that day, Firdaus refuses to bend her head; she looks people straight in the eyes and stares at money. She refuses two men because "there are plenty of men and I want to choose with whom to go" (p. 68). It takes many years before Firdaus tears her body and self from the people who held them in their grasp and they become her own. Now, she decides where to live, what to eat and who to sleep with. At the age of twenty-five, she has her first apartment, her bank account mounts continually, and she has free time to read or discuss politics with a few close friends of her choosing. She receives guests in her bedroom because her library is reserved for her alone. The first time that Di'aa, a journalist and man of culture, visits, he claims that he prefers to talk over anything else, but when he mocks Firdaus' profession and claims that she is not respectable, she repels his advances; however, his words hammer in her previously tranquil mind long after he leaves, causing her to see her life in a new way. She had not known before that she was not a respected woman, and nothing can make her become the same woman she was before that night. She becomes a different woman who is determined to become respectable.

Using her secondary school certificate, she applies for jobs and is finally hired by one of the big, industrial concerns as the secretary for a chairman. After work, Firdaus returns to the small room that she rents from an old, religious woman as this is all her meager salary permits. She signs in and out of work in the register while the higher officials come and go as they please. When a higher official offers to give her a lift home in his car, she shocks him by stating that "the price of my body is much higher than the price that can be paid for it with a pay rise" (p. 75).

During her three years in the company, no top executive or higher official touches her because she has no wish to humiliate her body at a low price, but Firdaus realizes that she had more respect and privileges as a prostitute. She pities the girls who trade their bodies for a meal or good annual reviews, and when she is propositioned, she explains that she does not "value my honor and reputation more than the other girls, but my price is much higher than theirs" (p. 76).

Though she realizes that the female employee is more fearful of losing her job than the prostitute is of losing her life, Firdaus is not too keen on keeping her job which makes the authorities keener on keeping her, and word goes around that she is an honorable woman. Despite everything, she likes her job and sometimes stays in the small garden on the grounds after night falls because she is in no hurry to return to her dreary apartment.



Chapter 2, pages 77-86

Chapter 2, pages 77-86 Summary and Analysis

One night, Ibrahim, an employee, sees Firdaus in the garden and comforts her as she cries, and he denies crying though she sees the tears drop down his face. Her relationship with Ibrahim which ensues parallels her relationship with Miss Iqbal identically, insinuating that Firdaus was in love with Miss Iqbal. As Firdaus and Ibrahim hold hands, a memory emerges but is lost before she can voice it. After that night, she wants to talk to him but forgets what she wants to say before her lips part, and he treats her like every other female employee.

She tries to explain what happened to her friend, Fatheya, but when she tries to recall the scene, all of the faces merge together. When Fatheya asks if Firdaus is in love with Ibrahim, Firdaus claims that is impossible because he cannot possibly love a poor girl like her. She joins a revolutionary committee of which Ibrahim is chairman, and one day, Ibrahim stops her as she runs for the bus to admire her energy, zeal and conviction. Ibrahim says it would do him good to talk to Firdaus for a while, and he tells her that he has thought of her since the first time they met and can no longer hide his feelings.

During that day and the next, they talk about everything, and when Firdaus beds Ibrahim on the third night, she feels as though she holds the whole world captive in her hands. A colleague wonders what is going on because Firdaus' face seems different, but when Firdaus claims to be in love, her colleague says she is living an illusion since there is no such thing as love.

Firdaus watches Ibrahim cross the courtyard but feels estranged as others congratulate him on his engagement to the chairman's daughter. Firdaus covers her ears to shut out their voices and walks the streets, returning home at night, exhausted, to cry. She returns to the company premises and gathers her belongings, looking for Ibrahim in vain. As she leaves the building and walks down the street, she turns around as though expecting something to happen, but it does not.

Firdaus has never experienced such pain and suffering; as a prostitute, the pain was imaginary because she was not herself. She had lowered her defenses because she had expected something from love, but she receives only humiliation. As a prostitute, she let men have her body, but in love, she gave her heart and soul, hoping to find herself and become a respected, cherished human being. She was not destined to achieve her desires and remained a poor, insignificant employee despite her effort and sacrifices. Her virtue is seen not as an asset but as stupidity to be despised even more than depravity and vice.



Chapter 2, pages 86-96

Chapter 2, pages 86-96 Summary and Analysis

The time comes for Firdaus to shed the last grain of virtue, to become aware of the truth and recognize what she wants. She realizes that men deceive women, marriage is a system built on the most cruel suffering for women, and the prostitute is the least deluded of all women. In the quiet streets at midnight, Firdaus is filled with tranquility like a woman free to do what she wants and fearless because she has already undergone everything which can hurt her. She opens her arms wide to embrace the night and sings "I hope for nothing I want nothing I fear nothing I am free" (p. 87). When she goes home with a man in a car, she realizes revolutionary men are no different from the rest.

Firdaus meets Ibrahim four years after he marries and refuses to bed him, but several years later, she agrees and charges him; she realizes he never loved her and only came to her every night because he did not have to pay. Firdaus secretly hates men because they want to feel noble by reminding her that she is low, so she refuses to let them play the role of her savior since no one rescued her from her husband or heartbreak. By rejecting men's attempts to save her and by remaining a prostitute, she proves to herself that she has some freedom. Sometimes, she says no because she is not a prostitute in the full sense of the word since they always say yes, and her price increases because men cannot stand being rejected by a woman.

She becomes a very successful prostitute and is sent for by a very important person from a foreign state, but her refusal makes him more intent on gaining a victory over her. Firdaus is imprisoned, but she hires a lawyer and is released without charges because the court decides she is an honorable woman. She learns "that honour required large sums of money to protect it, but that large sums of money could not be obtained without losing one's honour" (p. 91). She never doubts her own integrity and honor as a woman.

Marzouk, a pimp, forces Firdaus to share the larger portion of her earnings with him and beats her when she pushes him away. When she tries to leave, he prevents her, and she is filled with a passionate hate. Marzouk slaps her when she reaches for the door, but when he reaches for his knife, Firdaus is faster; she grabs Marzouk's knife and stabs him. Wondering why she never stabbed a man before, Firdaus realizes fear prevented her until the moment she saw fear in Marzouk's eyes.



Chapter 2, page 96-103

Chapter 2, page 96-103 Summary and Analysis

As Firdaus walks down the dark, silent street, her footsteps are those of "a woman who believed in herself, knew where she was going, and could see her goal" (p. 96). She walks with her head held high, and at the corner, an Arab prince in a luxurious car offers her three thousand pounds. In his bed, she allows her body to slip away and agrees that she feels pleasure as he rejoices like a fool. Finally, she angrily tells him she does not feel pleasure, and she tears his money into pieces as if destroying all the men she has ever known at once. The prince believes Firdaus is a princess, though he thought her to be a prostitute at first. She is neither, but has been taught from her youth to grow up as a prostitute. Her father never taught her to kill; life taught her to kill.

She admits that she has killed a man, but the prince does not believe her. When she slaps him and says stabbing him would be just as easy, his eyes fill with fear, but before she can slap him again, he screams, summoning the police who he tells that Firdaus is a criminal and killer. Firdaus denies being a criminal because only men can be criminals. When the police say she is a dangerous and savage woman, she says "I am speaking the truth. And truth is savage and dangerous" (p. 100).

She is imprisoned because they are afraid of her since she has exposed the face of their ugly reality. She is condemned to death because they are afraid to let her live, not because she killed a man. As long as she lives, she will kill them because their lives mean more crime, plunder and booty. Firdaus triumphs over life and death because she no longer desires life or fears death; she is free from wants, hopes and fears, but they want to find something that she wants, hopes or fears so they can enslave her again. One man asks her to send an appeal, but she wants no pardon because "I prefer to die for a crime I have committed rather than to die for one of the crimes which you have committed" (p. 101). She waits for them because they will come soon and she will be in an unknown place tomorrow.

The journey fills Firdaus with a pride she has been searching for her entire life. She spits on pictures of leaders in the newspaper, though she does not know them. She always strongly desire to smash a man's face, but she was unable to lift her hand for fear. She rid herself of this fear the moment she did it, and the movement was easy to execute, even with a sharp knife in her hand. After years of struggle, Firdaus arrives at the primitive truths which release her from the fear of death. She killed with truth, not a knife, and her truth frightens them because it gives her great strength and protects her from fear.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Firdaus' voice falls silent, and Nawal El Saadawi moves as though dreaming. She does not feel the coldness of the ground like in a dream, and Firdaus' now silent voice still echoes in her ears, flowing from all directions, like a dream; however, the woman in front of her is real and her voice is a real voice, and Saadawi is certainly awake. Suddenly, the door is thrown open, and several armed policemen surround Firdaus because her "time has come" (p. 107). Saadawi watches Firdaus leave with them and never sees her again, but her voice continues to echo, vibrating the entire world and spreading fear of the truth which kills. Firdaus paid the price of the world being full of lies. Saadawi goes to her car with her eyes averted to the ground. She is ashamed of her life, fears and lies. Everywhere on the streets and in the people, she sees the lies and hypocrisy. Saadawi slams her foot on the accelerator to stamp out the world but quickly brakes hard, bringing the car to a halt, and "at that moment I realizes that Firdaus had more courage than I" (p. 108).



Characters

Firdaus

Firdaus is the main character of this story, and she acts as the narrator of Chapter 2. She holds her head high, calmly moves her hands and has a stern look in her brown eyes. She is imprisoned and sentenced to death for killing a man, but she refuses to sign an appeal to lessen her sentence to life imprisonment. At first, she refuses to meet Nawal El Saadawi, but she finally agrees to share her terrible tale. As a child, Firdaus lives with her parents. She receives pleasure from Mohammadain but stops feeling pleasure after her mother cuts off her clitoris, though Firdaus' uncle still touches her. Firdaus does not understand who she, her mother or father is. She often goes hungry while her father eats. After her father dies, her uncle puts her in elementary school, and he takes her to live with him in Cairo after her mother dies. Firdaus likes school, and after she receives her primary school certificate, a strange thing happens to her as pleasure reawakens in her body. When her uncle marries, she is sent to the boarding section of the school, and she likes school and dreams about her hopes for the future. In her despair one night, she is comforted by and falls in love with Miss Iqbal, but she never sees her after receiving her secondary school certificate and returning to live with her uncle.

Firdaus' uncle's wife convinces him to marry Firdaus off to Sheikh Mahmoud, an old man who beats Firdaus. When Firdaus runs away from Sheikh Mahmoud, she lives peacefully and happily with Bayoumi until he begins to beat her and locks her up in his flat so that he and his friends can use her sexually. After escaping from Bayoumi, Firdaus is taken in by Sharifa Salah el Dine who acts as her pimp until Fawzy, a client, wants to marry Firdaus and beats and rapes Sharifa when she refuses. Seeing this, Firdaus runs away yet again, but now, she gets her own apartment and prospers financially as a prostitute until Di'aa tells her that she is not a respectable woman. She gets a job at a big industrial operation where she has an affair and falls in love with Ibrahim, but she returns to prostitution when she learns that Ibrahim is engaged to the chairman's daughter.

Firdaus learns the truth: that all women are victims of deception, but prostitutes are less deceived than other women. She chooses the men she will bed and becomes very successful, being paid the highest price. This changes when Marzouk, a pimp, forces Firdaus to pay him most of her earnings in exchange for protection, though he beats and rapes her. When he tries to prevent Firdaus from leaving, Firdaus stabs Marzouk, fearing herself from fear. After bedding an Arab prince, Firdaus confesses to killing a man, and she is imprisoned and sentenced to death because she knows the truth and is free because she no longer wants, hopes or fears anything. The journey to a place unknown to the world fills Firdaus with pride. After she finishes her story about her life, she is taken to her execution. Firdaus is executed at the end of 1974, evoking in Saadawi the need to "challenge and to overcome those forces that deprive human beings of their right to live, to love and to real freedom" (p. iv).



Nawal El Saadawi

Nawal El Saadawi is the author of *Woman at Point Zero* and the narrator of the Author's Preface, Chapter 1 and Chapter 3. She writes this novel after an encounter with Firdaus in Qanatir Prison. As a psychiatrist, she had started research on the neuroses of Egyptian woman a few months earlier after being removed from her functions as Director of Health Education and editor-in-chief of the magazine "Health" by the Minister of Health at the end of 1972 due to her chosen path as a feminist author and novelist. In 1973, Saadawi writes *Firdaus, or Woman at Point Zero*, because Firdaus evokes in her the "need to challenge and to overcome those forces that deprive human beings of their right to live, to love, and to real freedom" (p. iv).

Saadawi was always attracted to the idea of prison, likely because she lived in a country where prominent intellectuals were frequently imprisoned for "political offenses", though at the time, she did not expect to be imprisoned on September 5, 1981 with 1,035 others under Sadat's decree. Saadawi meets and exchanges ideas with a doctor at Qanatir Prison who mentions Firdaus, a woman sentenced to death for killing a man, and he agrees to try to convince Firdaus to allow Saadawi to interview her. At first, Firdaus refuses to meet with Saadawi, causing the psychiatrist's self-esteem to suffer, but Firdaus finally agrees to share her terrible but wonderful story. For Saadawi, Firdaus remains a woman apart, though she looks for her when she is imprisoned in 1981; while some remind Saadawi of Firdaus, Firdaus remains unique because of her fearlessness.

Saadawi listens to Firdaus' story as though she is in a dream. She does not feel the cold floor, and Firdaus' eyes and voice take on dream-like qualities. Saadawi watches Firdaus being taken from her cell toward her execution, and she never sees her again. Leaving the prison, she sees the lies and hypocrisy in the world. Saadawi rams the accelerator of her car to stamp out the world, but she stops hard and immediately, realizing that Firdaus has more courage than she does.

Firdaus' Father

Firdaus' father is a poor, illiterate, peasant farmer. Every Friday, he attends mosque with the other men and praises the imam's eloquence. When a female child dies, he attends business as usual, but he beats his wife when a male child dies. Firdaus' father never misses a meal, even if his wife and children go hungry, and after his supper, he drinks water, smokes a water pipe and snores loudly. After he dies, Firdaus' uncle sends her to school.

Firdaus' Mother

Firdaus' mother removes Firdaus' clitoris when Firdaus asks how her mother gave birth to her without a father. Firdaus recalls that her mother's eyes followed her everywhere when she first learned to walk, but when Firdaus replaces her mother in washing her



father's legs, her mother changes, and her eyes never seem to be touched by the light. After Firdaus' mother dies, her uncle takes Firdaus to live with him in Cairo.

Mohammadain

Mohammadain is a little boy who gave Firdaus pleasure when they played bride and bridegroom in the fields as children.

Firdaus' Uncle

Firdaus' uncle is much older than she is, and he attends classes at El Azhar in Cairo. He teaches Firdaus the alphabet, and she begs to go with him when he returns to Cairo. He also touches Firdaus under her galabeya while she kneads dough, but she feels no pleasure. Firdaus' uncle sends her to school when her father dies, and after her mother dies, he takes her to live with him in Cairo. Firdaus is closer to her uncle than her father, and though she wants to tell him she loves him, she is unable. When he marries a cold woman, he sends Firdaus to the boarding section of her school, and after Firdaus receives her secondary school certificate, her uncle agrees to marry her to Sheikh Mahmoud.

Uncle's Wife

Firdaus' uncle marries the daughter of his teacher at El Azhar. His wife is a short, fat woman with a fair complexion, and her voice has a softness born of cruelty. Her eyes are large and black with extinguished vitality that leaves pools of dark, sleepy indifference. She objects to having sex with her husband because it is sinful, and she convinces her husband to send Firdaus to boarding school and to marry Sheikh Mahmoud.

Wafeya

Wafeya is Firdaus' friend at school. The two girls pull their beds together at night to talk. Wafeya talks about being in love with her cousin, while Firdaus speaks of her hopes for the future.

Miss Iqbal

Miss Iqbal is a teacher at Firdaus' secondary school, and she is short and plump with long, black hair and black eyes. She comforts Firdaus on the playground and collects Firdaus' secondary school certificate for her, but Firdaus never sees Miss Iqbal again after the ceremony.



Sheikh Mahmoud

Firdaus' uncle's wife is Sheikh Mahmoud's niece, and she convinces her husband to marry Firdaus to him because he is a virtuous man with a large pension and no children. He is much older than Firdaus, and his eyes always watch her. He has a large swelling with a hole in the middle on his chin under his lip. Sheikh Mahmoud begrudges Firdaus any food and beats her for wasting scraps. When she runs away to her uncle's house, Sheikh Mahmoud beats Firdaus with a stick and rapes her, causing her to run away to the streets.

Bayoumi

Bayoumi owns a coffee-house in Cairo. He has a dark complexion and calm, resigned eyes, and Firdaus feels no fear from his face. After Firdaus runs away from Sheikh Mahmoud, Bayoumi takes her to live with him and promises to find her a job. At first, he is very kind, but when Firdaus insists upon working, Bayoumi beats her and locks her in his flat for him and his friends to use sexually, until a neighbor helps Firdaus escape.

Sharifa Salah el Dine

Sharifa Salah el Dine is an attractive woman who approaches Firdaus on a bench facing the river after Firdaus escapes from Bayoumi. She takes Firdaus home where she bathes and dresses her. Sharifa tells Firdaus that she must value herself highly so that men know her worth. When she refuses to let Fawzy take Firdaus, he rapes and beats her.

Fawzy

Fawzy is the only man at Sharifa's establishment to realize that Firdaus feels pain during sex. When Sharifa refuses to let him take Firdaus to marry, he beats and rapes Sharifa.

Di'aa

Di'aa is a journalist and man of culture who tells Firdaus that she is not a respectable woman, causing her to quit prostitution and obtain a secretarial job.

Ibrahim

Ibrahim is a short, stocky man with fuzzy black hair and black eyes who works with Firdaus after she quits prostitution. He comforts her in the garden when she cries, and they begin an affair, causing Firdaus to fall in love with him. When Ibrahim gets engaged to the chairman's daughter, Firdaus quits her job. She refuses sex with him four years



after his marriage, but several years later, she agrees and charges Ibrahim for sex. Firdaus realizes that Ibrahim never loved her and only came to her for free sex.

Marzouk

Marzouk is a pimp who forces Firdaus to share her profits. He rapes and beats her, but when he tries to stop her from leaving, Firdaus stabs Marzouk, freeing her from fear.

Arab Prince

The Arab prince propositions Firdaus and agrees to pay three thousand pounds. He angers her during sex by repeatedly asking if she feels pleasure. Afterward, Firdaus rips up his money and admits that she murdered a man. She slaps the prince when he does not believe her, and he has her arrested for murder because she is a dangerous and savage woman.



Objects/Places

Qanatir Prison

Firdaus is imprisoned in Qanatir Prison, and this is where Nawal El Saadawi visits and interviews her.

Firdaus' Father's House

Firdaus spends her childhood living in her father's house until her parents die.

El Azhar

Firdaus' uncle attends El Azhar in Cairo, a school only for men.

Cairo

Firdaus' uncle takes her to Cairo to live with him after her parents' deaths.

Egypt

Egypt is the main setting of this book and the country where Firdaus' life story occurs.

Firdaus' Uncle's House

In Cairo, Firdaus lives in her uncle's house until he marries and sends her to the boarding section of the school.

School

Firdaus' uncle sends her to school, and she loves it. After he marries, he sends her to live at the boarding section of the school.

Sheikh Mahmoud's House

Firdaus lives at Sheikh Mahmoud's house after her uncle forces her to marry the old man, but she runs away to the streets when her husband beats her.



Bayoumi's House

After running away from Sheikh Mahmoud, Firdaus lives with Bayoumi at his house. Though he is kind at first, Bayoumi begins locking Firdaus in his flat so that he and his friends can use her sexually. Firdaus escapes with a neighbor's help.

Sharifa Salah el Dine's House

Firdaus lives in luxury at Sharifa Salah el Dine's house, but she never leaves her bedroom until she runs away after Fawzy rapes and beats Sharifa.

Firdaus' Apartment

At the age of twenty-five, Firdaus has her own apartment for the first time. She is proud and keeps it neat. Firdaus receives guests in her bedroom, keeping her library for herself alone.

Firdaus' Job

After Di'aa tells Firdaus she is not a respectable woman, she acquires a job as a secretary at a big industrial concern. She refuses the propositions of the other employees until she falls in love and has an affair with Ibrahim. After she learns of Ibrahim's engagement to the chairman's daughter, Firdaus packs her belongings and leaves her job in the middle of the night.

Knife

When Marzouk tries to prevent her from leaving, Firdaus stabs and kills him with his own knife.

Fear

Firdaus rids herself of fear by killing Marzouk. She is executed for this lack of fear because, without fear, "they" can no longer control her.



Themes

Sexism

One of the most prevalent themes in this book is that of sexism as many of the events that transpire in Firdaus' life are a result of her being a woman. Nawal El Saadawi also experiences sexism which is detailed in the book. Saadawi is able to interview Firdaus because she is unemployed after being relieved from her functions as the Director of Health Education and the editor-in-chief of the magazine "Health" due to choosing the path of a feminist author and novelist whose perspectives are viewed unfavorably by the authorities. Firdaus' story evokes in Saadawi the need "to challenge and to overcome those forces that deprive human beings of their right to live, to love, and to real freedom" (p. iv); this obviously results from Firdaus' status as a woman since the story makes it evident that men's rights are not suppressed in the same way. As Firdaus begins her story, she mentions her father's knowledge of how to exchange a virgin daughter for a substantial dowry while there was still time. This, combined with his tendency to ignore the deaths of female children while beating his wife for the deaths of male children, emphasizes the way that this culture views females. Also, Firdaus' clitoris is cut off when she asks her mother a question about her birth, ending the possibility of sexual pleasure for her. Her uncle laughs at her desire to attend classes at El Azhar because the school is restricted to men.

After Firdaus receives her primary school certificate, her uncle teaches her that dancing and kissing men are sins, though these vices are apparently such only as they apply to the female gender; this is also ironic as her uncle touched her genitals when she was a small child. In school, Firdaus wants to become a head of state even though she learns that all rulers are avaricious men and she is aware that only men become heads of state. Her uncle and his wife marry Firdaus to Sheikh Mahmoud in exchange for a large dowry, and when she runs away after her husband beats her, her uncle's wife tells her that "a virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience" (p. 44). When Firdaus expresses a desire to work, Bayoumi calls her a low woman, beats her and locks her in his flat for him and his friends to use sexually. Sharifa teaches Firdaus that she must value herself highly because men are incapable of understanding a woman's worth, but Sharifa is beaten and raped when she refuses to allow Fawzy to take Firdaus away from her brothel.

When Di'aa tells Firdaus that she is not a respected woman, she gets a secretarial job, but she is propositioned there as well. After Ibrahim breaks her heart, she realizes that, as a prostitute, a man only gets her body while she keeps her heart and soul as her own, but the case is not the same in love. Men deceive women and then punish them for being deceived, but prostitutes are the least deluded of women.

After Ibrahim, Firdaus is freed from the desire for marriage, which she recognizes as subjection to men; all women are prostitutes, but a wife is paid the least. All women's lives are miserable because men see women as something to be abused and sold.



Marzouk is able to force his services as a pimp upon Firdaus because, as a man, he has better connections with the police. When Firdaus is arrested for killing Marzouk, she tells the Arab prince and the policemen that only men can be criminals, and she is not a criminal since she only kills criminals or men. She is sentenced to death because by becoming free of hopes, desires and fears, she can no longer be enslaved like other women, and thus, Firdaus becomes an object to be feared by the men in authority.

Eyes

Eyes play a recurring role in *Woman at Point Zero*. In the Author's Preface, Nawal El Saadawi notes the stern look of Firdaus' brown eyes and claims that Firdaus is distinguished from other women by the way she looked at Saadawi from the depths of her eyes. It is as though Saadawi dies the moment that her eyes make contact with Firdaus' eyes, which are unwavering eyes that kill by cutting deep down inside like a knife.

When Firdaus tries to recall her mother when she first saw her, she remembers eyes that watched and were the only thing to hold onto as Firdaus learned to walk. Once Firdaus is older and her mother becomes cruel, "when I used to look into her eyes I could feel she was not my mother" (p. 18) as her eyes get blacker all the time and the light never seems to touch them. She describes her uncle's wife's eyes as large and black with an extinguished vitality that leaves pools of sleepy indifference.

At school, Firdaus' eyes follow people, and Miss Iqbal's eyes observe Firdaus in the darkness of the playground. At the ceremony to receive her secondary school certificate, Firdaus can only discern Miss Iqbal's eyes which seem to fasten upon her. After hearing her uncle and his wife discuss marrying her to Sheikh Mahmoud, Firdaus avoids her uncle's eyes at breakfast the next morning, and Hala's eyes are wide as she watches Firdaus pack to run away. When Firdaus runs away to avoid marrying Sheikh Mahmoud, she is frightened to perceive two eyes in the dark appraising her face and body, and this causes her to return to her uncle's house and marry Sheikh Mahmoud who watches her intently while she eats. While she lives with Bayoumi, Firdaus' eyes follow the schoolgirls, and as she meets Sharifa Salah El Dine, Sharifa's pupils seem to have turned a dark green. Firdaus begins to stare at money, wondering who decided that it was forbidden, and she stares straight ahead, refusing to walk with her eyes downcast. In the garden outside her job, Ibrahim's eyes follow Firdaus, and when she quits after learning of his engagement, her eyes search the building and grounds for him. When Firdaus stabs Marzouk, she sees fear in his eyes, freeing her from fear, and she walks with her head high, refusing to avert her eyes.

Firdaus' Development

Since Firdaus is the main character of this story, one of the most important themes introduced is her development as a result of her experiences. She loses sexual pleasure after her mother cuts off her clitoris, and she feels like a stranger in her father's



house when her uncle laughs at her desire to take classes at El Azhar. Her mother's cold eyes and her father's indifference convinces Firdaus that these people are not really her parents. When her uncle takes her to the cinema to celebrate receiving her primary school certificate, pleasure is awakened in Firdaus. At school, she learns that all rulers are avaricious men. She runs away from her uncle's house to avoid marrying Sheikh Mahmoud but returns due to being terrorized by the eyes watching her on the dark streets. In her marriage, she learns that all husbands beat their wives and a wife's duty is perfect obedience. At Bayoumi's, Firdaus finds that the street is the only safe place for her to seek refuge. Sharifa Salah El Dine teaches Firdaus that life is hard and a woman must recognize her own value to earn money.

After selling her body for the first time, Firdaus recognizes the difference that money makes in her life, and she sets her own price and refuses to bend her head. Di'aa informs Firdaus that she is not a respectable woman so she gets a secretarial job, but this, combined with her experiences with Ibrahim, teaches her that a prostitute is more valued and respected than a female employee. She also realizes that she is better able to protect her heart and soul as a prostitute by allowing men to possess only her body. All women are victims of deception, but the prostitute is the least deceived.

Firdaus finds freedom in not wanting, hoping or fearing anything, and she hates men who set themselves in a chivalrous role and refusing to allow them to rescue her from a life of prostitution shows her that she has some freedom. Because men cannot stand rejection, her prices increases when she refuses them. When she is arrested for refusing a politician, Firdaus learns that honor requires money to protect it, but money cannot be obtained without losing her honor. Since men are in charge of the world, all women are forced to sell their bodies, but wives are the lowest paid type of prostitute.

Marzouk's power over Firdaus shows that the law punishes women for prostitution while turning a blind eye to what men do to prostitutes. When Firdaus stabs Marzouk, she realizes she was afraid, but her fear disappeared when she saw the fear in his eyes. She learns that the truth is savage and dangerous and all men are criminals who plunder. She is condemned to death because she can no longer be controlled since she no longer desires, hopes or fears. Firdaus prefers to die for crimes that she has committed rather than crimes that men have committed. When she kills Marzouk, she kills with the truth which frightens those in authority because it gives her great strength and protects her from fearing death, life, hunger, nakedness or destruction.



Style

Perspective

In *Woman at Point Zero*, there are two perspectives. The first one appears in the Author's Preface, Chapter 1 and Chapter 3, and this is the perspective of Nawal El Saadawi, the author. Saadawi is a psychiatrist who specializes in researching neuroses in Egyptian women. As such, she receives the opportunity to interview Firdaus, a woman sentenced to death for killing a man and the main character of this story. When Saadawi interviews Firdaus at Qanatir Prison before her execution, Saadawi is awed by Firdaus' lack of fear, and Firdaus' story inspires in Saadawi the need to "challenge and to overcome those forces that deprive human beings of their right to live, to love, and to real freedom" (p. iv).

The second perspective utilized in this story is that of Firdaus in the second chapter as she shares her tragic life story with Saadawi. Firdaus is qualified to take over the narrative at this point because only she knows the horrors she has encountered. The intended audience is anyone who can understand the oppression that Firdaus has undergone, though it seems to be more particularly aimed at females due to the derogatory comments about men made throughout Firdaus' narrative. The story is written to enrage the audience and inspire them with the need to challenge the forces that suppress human rights.

Tone

Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* is written from a very outraged, subjective tone. Saadawi writes about meeting Firdaus and then allows Firdaus to become the narrator in order to share the story of her life. This leads the audience to pity Firdaus and allows them to share her experiences. The story is written to fuel the reader's outrage and indignation about the way that Firdaus, and many other Egyptian women, is treated. In reading this book, the reader sees the reasons behind Firdaus' actions and is filled with strong opinions about the events that lead to her murdering Marzouk.

Additionally, as the reader becomes familiar with Firdaus, they can see the reasons behind her actions which seem justifiable and reasonable. In reading Saadawi's opinions about Firdaus and her life, these opinions seem to assimilate with the reader's own to result in an outraged and sympathetic audience who shares the desire to overcome the forces which deprive people of their most basic liberties after seeing the result that such deprivation lead to in Firdaus' life.

Structure

Woman at Point Zero is a very short book which contains barely over a hundred pages. The book begins with the Author's Preface, followed by three chapters. The Author's



Preface is four pages long while Chapter 1 is seven pages in length. Chapter 2 contains the largest portion of the book, lasting ninety-three pages, and the story ends with Chapter 3, a mere two pages. The Author's Preface is written from the perspective of Nawal El Saadawi at a point much later than the rest of the novel was written, and this section glorifies Firdaus and explains how the events in the book affected Saadawi after they actually occurred. This also tells Saadawi's background and explains more fully how she came to interview Firdaus. This is very useful in allowing the reader to see the results of this interview on the author in the future.

The first chapter provides some additional background on Saadawi, including her feelings regarding Firdaus' initial rejection and her reaction to actually meeting Firdaus. In Chapter 2, Firdaus tells the wonderfully terrible story of her life, and Chapter 3 shows Saadawi's initial reaction to the tale after Firdaus is lead away to her execution. This format is very useful in the way that it begins and ends with providing Saadawi's opinions which directs the reader's reaction to Firdaus' story to that of rage and indignation. The book's format allows the focus to remain on Firdaus, even as Saadawi is talking to the reader, and this is very beneficial in achieving Saadawi's ultimate goal, to inspire readers to question the suppression of human rights and become enraged with the desire to eliminate such forces that create an environment that lead to the events that happened to Firdaus.



Quotes

"Firdaus, however, remained a woman apart. She stood out amongst the others, vibrated within me, or sometimes lay quiet, until the day when I put her down in ink on paper and gave her life after she had died. For, at the end of 1974, Firdaus was executed, and I never saw her again. And yet somehow she was always before my eyes. I could see her in front of me, trace the lines of her forehead, her lips, her eyes, watch her as she moved with pride. When, in autumn 1981, it was my turn to be confined behind bars, I would watch the other women prisoners as they moved through the inner courtyard, as though looking for her, trying to glimpse her head which she always held so high, the calm movements of her hands, or the stern look of her brown eyes. I could not bring myself to believe that she had really died."

Author's Preface, p. iii

"Firdaus is the story of a woman driven by despair to the darkest of ends. This woman, despite her misery and despair, evoked in all those who, like me, witnessed the final moment of life, a need to challenge and to overcome those forces that deprive human beings of their right to live, to love and to real freedom."

Author's Preface, pp. iii-iv

"To be quite honest, I do not really feel she is a murderer. If you look into her face, her eyes, you will never believe that so gentle a woman can commit murder."

Chap. 1, pp. 1-2

"Murderer or not, she's an innocent woman and does not deserve to be hanged. They are the ones that ought to hang."

Chap. 1, p. 2

"Let me speak. Do not interrupt me. I have no time to listen to you. They are coming to take me at six o'clock this evening. Tomorrow morning I shall no longer be here. Nor will I be in any place known to man. This journey to a place unknown to everybody on this earth fills me with pride. All my life I have been searching for something that would fill me with pride, make me feel superior to everyone else, including kings, princes and rulers."

Chap. 2, p. 11

"[My uncle] was doing to me what Mohammadain had done to me before. In fact, he was doing even more, but I no longer felt the strong sensation of pleasure that radiated from an unknown and yet familiar part of my body. I closed my eyes and tried to reach the pleasure I had known before but in vain. It was as if I could no longer recall the exact spot from which it used to arise, or as though a part of me, of my being, was gone and would never return."

Chap. 2, p.15

"A strange thing was happening to me, strange because it had never happened to me before, or because it had been happening to me all the time, ever since I could



remember. Somewhere, in some distant spot within my body was awakening an old pleasure lost a long time ago, or a new pleasure still unknown, and indefinable, for it seemed to arise outside my body, or in a part of my being severed from it many years ago."

Chap. 2, p. 22

"I spoke of my hopes for the future. There was nothing in my past, or in my childhood, to talk about, and no love or anything of the sort in the present. If I had something to say, therefore, it could only concern the future. For the future was still mine to paint in the colours I desired. Still mine to decide about freely, and change as I saw fit."

Chap. 2, p. 25

"The sudden contact made my body shiver with a pain so deep that it was almost like pleasure, or a pleasure so deep that it bordered on pain. It was a remote pleasure, buried in such far away depths that it seemed to have arisen a very long time ago, longer than the length of memory, older than the remembered years of life's journey. Something no sooner remembered than forgotten, as if it had happened just once before, only to be lost for all time, or as though it had never happened at all."

Chap. 2, p. 33

"I can swear by Allah, your holiness, that the Lord must really love this niece of yours, for she will be really fortunate if Sheikh Mahmoud agrees to marry her".

Chap. 2, p. 37

"A new world was opening up in front of my eyes, a world which for me had not existed before. Maybe it had always been there, always existed, but I had never seen it, never realized it had been there all the time. How was it that I had been blind to its existence all these years? Now it seemed as if a third eye had suddenly been slit open in my head."

Chap. 2, p. 40

"The precepts of religion permitted such punishment [as beatings]. A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience."

Chap. 2, p. 44

"Everybody has to die, Firdaus. I will die, and you will die. The important thing is how to live until you die... You must be harder than life, Firdaus. Life is very hard. The only people who really live are those who are harder than life itself... Life is a snake. They are the same, Firdaus. If the snake realizes you are not a snake, it will bite you. And if life knows you have no sting, it will devour you."

Chap. 2, p. 54

"Neither Bayoumi, nor any of his cronies realized your worth, because you failed to value yourself highly enough. A man does not know a woman's value, Firdaus. She is the one who determines her value. The higher you price yourself, the more he will realize what you are really worth, and be prepared to pay with the means at his disposal. And if he has no means, he will steal from someone else to give you what you



demand."

Chap. 2, pp. 54-55

"You will get nothing out of feeling except pain."

Chap. 2, p. 56

"How many were the years of my life that went by before my body, and my self became really mine, to do with them as I wished? How many were the years of my life that were lost before I tore my body and my self away from the people who held me in their grasp since the very first day?"

Chap. 2, p. 68

"Nothing in the world seemed capable of making me the same woman I had been before I heard the two words pronounced by the man that night. From that moment onwards I became another woman. My previous life was behind me. I did not want to go back to it at any price, no matter what torture and suffering I might have to go through, even if I were to know hunger and cold, and utter destitution. Come what may, I had to become a respectable woman, even if the price were to be my life. I was prepared to do anything to put a stop to the insults that my ears had grown used to hearing, to keep the brazen eyes from running all over my body."

Chap. 2, pp. 72-73

"The price of my body is much higher than the price that can be paid for it with a pay rise."

Chap. 2, p. 75

"I admire you, Firdaus. If we had just five people in the company with your zeal, energy and conviction, we could do almost anything in the world."

Chap. 2, p. 81

"Love has made me a different person. It has made the world beautiful."

Chap. 2, p. 83

"I had never experienced suffering such as this, never felt a deeper pain. When I was selling my body to men the pain had been much less. It was imaginary, rather than real. As a prostitute I was not myself, my feelings did not arise from within me. They were not really mine. Nothing could really hurt me and make me suffer than the way I was suffering now. Never had I felt so humiliated as I felt this time."

Chap. 2, p. 85

"The time had come for me to shed the last grain of virtue, the last drop of sanctity in my blood. Now I was aware of the reality, of the truth. Now I knew what I wanted. Now there was no room for illusion. 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 so low, bind them in marriage and then chastise them with menial service for life, or insults, or blows. Now I realized that the least deluded of all women was the prostitute. That



marriage was the system built on the most cruel suffering for women."
Chap. 2, pp. 86-87

"A woman's life is always miserable. A prostitute, however, is a little better off. I was able to convince myself that I had chosen this life of my own free will. The fact that I rejected [men's] noble attempts to save me, my insistence on remaining a prostitute, proved to me this was my choice and that I had some freedom, at least the freedom to live in a situation better than that of other women."
Chap. 2, p. 89

"Now I had learnt that honour required large sums of money to protect it, but that large sums of money could not be obtained without losing one's honour."
Chap. 2, p. 91

"Yet not for a single moment did I have any doubts about my own integrity and honour as a woman. I knew that my profession had been invented by men, and that men were in control of both our worlds, the one on earth, and the one in heaven. That men force women to sell their bodies at a price, and that 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."
Chap. 2, p. 91

"For me the word impossible does not exist."
Chap. 2, p. 93

"Why was it that I had never stabbed a man before? I realized that I had been afraid, and that the fear had been within me all the time, until the fleeting moment when I read fear in his eyes."
Chap. 2, pp. 95-96

"I looked no different from the wife of an upperclass government official occupying a high position of authority. But my firm, confident steps resounding on the pavement proved that I was nobody's wife."
Chap. 2, p. 96

"It was as though I was destroying all the money I had ever held... and at the same time destroying all the men I had ever known, one after the other in a row... tearing them all to pieces one after the other, ridding myself of them once and for all, removing every trace their piastres had left on my fingers, tearing away the very flesh of my fingers to leave nothing but bone, ensuring that not a single vestige of these men would remain at all."
Chap. 2, p. 98

"For me the feats of kings and princes are no more than crimes, for I do not see things the way you do... No woman can be a criminal. To be a criminal one must be a man... I am speaking the truth. And truth is savage and dangerous."
Chap. 2, p. 100



"I knew why they were so afraid of me. I was the only woman who had torn the mask away, and exposed the face of their ugly reality. They condemned me to death not because I had killed a man- there are thousands of people being killed every day- but because they are afraid to let me live. They know that as long as I am alive they will not be safe, that I shall kill them. My life means their death. My death means their life. They want to live. And life for them means more crime, more plunder, unlimited booty. 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. I fear nothing. Therefore I am free. For during life it is our wants, our hopes, our fears that enslave us. The freedom I enjoy fills them with anger. They would like to discover that there is after all something which I desire, or fear, or hope for. Then they know they can enslave me once more."

Chap. 2, pp. 100-01

"I prefer to die for a crime I have committed rather than to die for one of the crimes which you have committed."

Chap. 2, p. 101

"For the truth is always easy and simple. And in its simplicity lies a savage power. I only arrived at the savage, primitive truths of life after years of struggle. For it is only very rarely that people can arrive at the simple, but awesome and powerful truths of life after only a few years. And to have arrived at the truth means that one no longer fears death. For death and truth are similar in that they both require a great courage if one wishes to face them. And truth is like death in that it kills. 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."

Chap. 2, pp. 102-03

"I saw her walk out with them. I never saw her again. But her voice continued to echo in my ears, vibrating in my head, in the cell, in the prison, in the streets, in the whole world, shaking everything, spreading fear wherever it went, the fear of the truth which kills, the power of truth, as savage, and as simple, and as awesome as death, yet as simple and as gentle as the child that has not yet learnt to lie. And because the world was full of lies, she had to pay the price."

Chap. 3, pp. 107-08

"And at that moment I realized that Firdaus had more courage than I."

Chap. 3, p. 108



Topics for Discussion

How was Firdaus raised to be a prostitute from her earliest years?

In Firdaus' experience, what is the difference between being a female employee and a prostitute?

Describe Firdaus' relationships with men.

What realization or truth does Firdaus come to after killing Marzouk?

Why is Firdaus imprisoned, and why does she refuse to sign an appeal?

How does Firdaus rid herself of fear, and what is the result?

Does Firdaus deserve to die? Why or why not?

What does Firdaus' narrative reveal about the condition of women in her society?