

An Arab Feminist's Indirect Perpetuation of Western Stereotypes about Muslim Women: Nawal El Saadawi's Woman at Point Zero

Date de réception : 2018-11-20

Date d'acceptation : 2019-12-18

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Abstract

The article analyses Nawal El Saadawi's Islamic feminism in Woman at Point Zero. It investigates whether the novel shows features of Islamic feminism or another version of Western feminism. Albeit El Saadawi is called an Islamic feminist, the analysis of her novel from an Islamic feminist perspective shows non-Islamic feminist practices in terms of disdaining daughters, female circumcision, molestation, preventing women from education, forced marriages, beating wives and prostitution. Consequently, El Saadawi's novel is not an Islamic feminist work. Rather, it unconsciously bolsters Western stereotypes about Muslim women who are regarded as oppressed by both men and Islam. Hence, calling El Saadawi an Islamic feminist misguides her audience, especially international readers to believe that every single practice in the novel is relevant to Islamic feminism and Islam. Yet, the presented practices are cultural ones. Therefore, El Saadawi's novel represents Arab feminism that is greatly influenced by Western feminism.

Keywords: Arab feminism, Islamic feminism, non-Islamic practices, Western feminism, Western stereotypes.

Résumé

L'article tente d'analyser le féminisme islamique de Nawal El Saadawi dans son roman femme au point zéro. Il estime d'affirmer que le roman présente des caractéristiques du féminisme islamique ou autre forme du féminisme. Toutefois, il est à noter qu'en dépit du fait qu'El Saadawi soit catégorisée en féministe islamique, son roman révèle des pratiques féministes (sexistes) non islamiques à l'instar de la dénégation des filles, de l'excision, la violence, de prévention de l'éducation, le mariage forcé à un âge précoce, le harcèlement sexuel et la prostitution. Dès lors, il est clair que le roman d'El Saadawi, n'est au aucun cas une œuvre du féminisme islamique, bien au contraire, elle met en exergue des stéréotypes occidentaux, considérant les femmes musulmanes comme opprimées à la fois par les hommes et l'islam. El Saadawi désignant de féministe islamique met son lectorat dans un état d'égarement dans la mesure où toute son œuvre serait confinée dans un cadre restreint, celui du féminisme islamique et l'islam. Bien entendu, que les pratiques présentées sont culturelles. Pour cette raison, le roman d'El Saadawi représente le féminisme arabe fortement influencé par le féminisme occidental.

Mots clés: féminisme arabe, féminisme islamique, pratiques non-islamiques, féminisme occidental, stéréotypes occidentaux.

المخلص

تحلل المقالة النسوية الإسلامية عند نوال السعداوي في "امرأة عند نقطة الصفر" وتدرس ما إذا كانت الرواية تظهر خصائص النسوية الإسلامية أو نسخة أخرى من النسوية الغربية. على الرغم من أن السعداوي تدعى نسائية إسلامية، إلا أن تحليل روايتها من منظور نسوي إسلامي يظهر ممارسات غير إسلامية من حيث ازدراء البنات، ختان الإناث، التحرش الجنسي، منع النساء من التعليم، الزواج القسري، ضرب الزوجات والبغاء. وبالتالي، رواية السعداوي ليست عملاً نسوياً إسلامياً لأنها تعزز بشكل غير مباشر الصور النمطية الغربية عن النساء المسلمات اللواتي يعتبرن مضطهدات من قبل الرجال والإسلام. ومن ثم، فإن تسمية السعداوي نسائية إسلامية يضلل جمهورها، ولا سيما القراء الدوليين، للاعتقاد بأن كل ممارسة واحدة في الرواية لها صلة بالنسوية الإسلامية والاسلام. لكن الممارسات المذكورة هي ممارسات ثقافية. وبذلك، فإن رواية السعداوي تمثل النسوية العربية المتأثرة بشكل كبير بالنسوية الغربية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النسوية العربية، النسوية الإسلامية، الممارسات غير الإسلامية، النسوية الغربية، الصور النمطية الغربية.

Introduction

Feminism, as a social movement defending women's rights, is a diversified and thorny topic, especially in relation to the Arab Muslim world. In comparison to other types of feminism, Islamic feminism is a recent movement to speak about the plight of Arab and Muslim women. Arab or Islamic feminism are used interchangeably by many scholars, but the most used expression is Islamic feminism. A myriad of Arab and Muslim authors are classified under this naming and called Islamic feminists and among them is Nawal El Saadawi. Mariam Cooke and Haideh Moghissi regard her as an Islamic feminist advocating Muslim women's rights. Thus, this article seeks to scrutinize Nawal El Saadawi's novel *Woman at Point Zero* to see whether it represents Islamic feminism, or another version of Western feminism. It questions El Saadawi's novel in perpetuating stereotypes about Muslim women and investigates the reasons behind her fame as an Arab author in the West in contrast to her scandalous position in her country. The article is an analytical study from an Islamic feminist standpoint. Most importantly, it sheds light on the expression Islamic feminism, due to its incompatibility with the written text of El Saadawi and its use that adds fuel to the already existing orientalist stereotypes about Muslim women and Islam.

Islamic feminism is a current movement that emerged by the late 1990's in the Arab and Muslim countries. However, there is no clear evidence about the person who coined the term. In addition, unlike secular Western feminism, Islamic feminism is difficult to define inasmuch as it is connected to religion. In fact, many documents demonstrate that feminism used by Arabs is called Islamic feminism, and it is the most widespread name in comparison to Arab feminism. For example, some scholars using Islamic feminism are Haideh Moghissi (1999), Miriam Cooke (2001), Barlas Asma (2002), Jane Hiddleston (2006), Kahf Mohja (2008) and Badran Margot (2009). Consequently, the naming Islamic feminism is highly used unlike Arab feminism.

Many scholars endeavor to define Islamic feminism, but the most cited quotation is by Margot Badran, who tried to give a succinct definition to Islamic feminism. She states that Islamic feminism "is a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm. Islamic feminism, which derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence" (242). Accordingly, Islamic feminism stems from "interpretation of Islam and gender grounded in ijihad, or independent intellectual investigation of the Qur'an and other religious texts" (3). The tenets of Islamic feminism are derived from Islam per se and religious scripts mainly the Quran. In this regard, religious texts are the primary source to advocate women's rights and gender equality. Moreover, Tariq Ramadan defines Islamic feminism as "going back to Islamic sources and using Islamic principles to act against any kind of discrimination" (qtd.in Coleman 54). Thus, the common point between the previous definitions is that Islamic feminism is definitely tied to Islam. Accordingly, the aim of Islamic feminism is to liberate Muslim women from patriarchal cultural practices that distort the image of Islam which highly bestows women with different rights.

Concerning the methods of Islamic feminism, they are relevant to the Quran and 'Hadith' (the Prophet Muhammad's sayings). Margot Badran clarifies this idea by saying:

A priority of Islamic feminism is to go straight to Islam's fundamental text, the Qur'an...The basic methodologies of Islamic feminism are the classic Islamic methodologies of ijihad and tafsir (interpretation of the Qur'an)...Feminist hermeneutics has taken three approaches: 1-revising verses of the Qur'an to correct false stories in common circulation...2-citing verses that unequivocally enunciate the equality of women and men; 3-deconstructing verses attentive to male and female difference that have been commonly interpreted in ways that justify male domination. (247-248)

In this regard, Islamic feminists use verses from the Quran to support gender parity, and revise

males' false interpretations of some Quranic passages. Asma Barlas, an Islamic feminist, also ascertains: "my purpose is both to critique the methods by which Muslims generate patriarchal readings of the Qur'ān and to recover the egalitarian aspects of Qur'ānic epistemology" (5). In addition to the Quran, Islamic feminism also draws its principles from 'Hadith' and 'Fiqh' (jurisprudence). Mulki Al-Sharmani says: "epistemologically, Islamic feminism can be classified according to two main categories....The first consists of works that focus on the Qur'an and its exegetical tradition....The second category of work focuses on critical engagements with Islamic fiqh or jurisprudence....In addition, there has been...engagement with the Hadith tradition" (86). Therefore, as its name denotes, Islamic feminism is clearly relevant to Islam's sources of the Quran and 'Hadith' per se.

Actually, the naming of Islamic feminism provokes ceaseless debates and endless discussions over the compatibility between Islam and feminism. In this vein, there are two opposing views concerning the relationship between Islam and feminism. The first view concerns a group of scholars including Hammed Shahidian (1998), Haideh Moghissi (1999) and Shahrazad Mojab (2001) who vehemently argue that Islam is an anti-feminist religion. It is misogynist, patriarchal and the reason behind Muslim women's subjugation. According to the aforementioned scholars, the label Islamic feminism includes two contradictory elements that cannot coexist. While Islam enslaves and suffocates women's freedom, feminism seeks to liberate women from all patriarchal shackles. Thus, there is no possible relationship between Islam and feminism and the naming of Islamic feminism becomes oxymoronic.

The second group of scholars views that Islamic feminism is not paradoxical. Albeit much ink has been spilled on the idea that Islam is against feminism, few researchers support a possible compatibility between Islam and feminism. Miriam Cooke (2001) is one scholar of this group who claims that Islam is not oppressive of women. She states that "Islam... is not gender-specific but rather

a faith system and way of life open equally to women and men" (xiii). Another researcher is Margot Badran (2009). She argues that Islamic feminism stems from the Quran's teachings and preaching (242) and there are "many verses of the Qur'an that declare male-female equality" (248). Unlike the first view, very few scholars contend that Islam per se is not anti-feminism.

Concerning the appearance of Islamic feminism, Egypt is regarded as a pioneering country and forerunner in advocating women's rights. Although feminism in Egypt appeared during the postcolonial era, there are many preceding feminist voices advocating gender parity and feminist consciousness, like Zainab al Fawwaz, Hind Naufal and Qasim Amin. In the 1900s, other female feminists, like Malak Hifni Nasif, Huda Sha'rawi and Zainab Al-Ghazali greatly contribute to the rise of feminism in Egypt. Nasif and Al-Ghazali claim that women's rights were bestowed from Islam. In this regard, feminists try to gain the deprived rights of women that are taken in the name of culture and traditions. However, other feminists, like Huda Sha'rawi veered from Islam's principles to follow Western principles of feminism (Badran 20-22). Moreover, many organizations during this period, like Muslim Women's Society, are influenced by the Islamic religion because of the emergence of an Islamic movement known as The Muslim Brothers led by Hasan al-Banna in 1928.

In general, it is worth noting that feminism in Egypt starts within an Islamic framework, then through its development, goes through different drastic changes and "toward the end of the 20th century...did feminism in Egypt come to be widely branded as anti-Islamic" (Badran148). In other words, it is mandatory to differentiate between secular and Islamic feminism. The latter is based on an Islamic framework and advocates Islamic reform in relation to family and women's position in society (Badran 226). In this respect, the principles of this type of feminism stem from the Quran and 'Hadith'. However, secular feminism focuses mainly on women's rights outside the religious Islamic framework, and its *modus operandi* is mainly secular.

In Egypt, there are some feminists using Islamic framework for their feminism, like Zainab El Ghazali and Safinez Kazim. The latter encourages the woman “to regain her lawful rights guaranteed to her by Islam” (Badran 152). Malak Hifni Nasif and Zainab Al-Ghazali call for women’s empowerment solely from the teachings of Islam. In fact, they represent the first wave of feminists in Egypt in 1930s and 1940s in which “there were cordial relations between feminist and Islamist women, who shared many goals” (217). Then, there was a gradual shift regarding the relationship between Islam and feminism. In modern times, Islamic feminism is ostensibly secular and removed from the teachings of Islam, especially with the failure of the Islamic state governed by the Muslim Brothers that suffocate the freedom of people. Margot Badran claims that “The ideology of the Muslim Brothers, laying stress on the moral foundations of society, articulated a conservative discourse privileging the patriarchal family, with male authority over women, and clear-cut differentiation of gender roles” (26). Hence, with their conservative rule, the Muslim Brothers pushed people to embrace secular thoughts. This is so apparent in the development of feminism in Egypt which started as an Islamic feminism to become secular at the end of the twentieth century.

Another early pioneer feminist leader is Nawal El Saadawi. She appears as an outstanding Egyptian feminist who belongs to the second generation of feminists in Egypt. Although she has some previous attempts to feminism, she gained prominence after the publication of her controversial book *Woman and Sex* in 1971 through which she “broke a cultural taboo by introducing the issue of sexual oppression of women connected with everyday customs, as well as the prevalence of deviant behaviours such as incest, that victimized women inside the family” (Badran 38-39). Hence, her writings are blacklisted and banned in her country, and her activities are controlled. In 1981, she was imprisoned for being a radical feminist. Yet, despite all the obstacles, El Saadawi continues her gender struggle through writing literary works to transmit her feminist ideas to her audience. One of

her works is *Woman at Point Zero* which is the focal point of this study.

The story of *Woman at Point Zero* (1983) belongs to fiction. It is based on a true encounter between El Saadawi as a psychiatrist and a prisoner in Qanatir prison in Egypt. The novel deals mainly with the ups and downs of the protagonist Firdaus from her childhood to her adulthood. It is about the plight of Firdaus in a modern Arab Muslim society and her eagerness to reach liberty. Although Nawal El Saadawi is known as an Islamic feminist par excellence, reading her work *Woman at Point Zero* from an Islamic feminist standpoint unravels many non-Islamic practices, like disdaining girls, female circumcision, molestation, preventing women from education, forced marriages, beating wives and prostitution that are not congruent with the tenets of Islamic feminism.

In her childhood, Firdaus undergoes several experiences that are irrelevant to Islamic deeds. First, she is disdained by her father because he simply prefers sons to daughters. Firdaus’ father, though showing some Islamic practices, like praying in the mosque and following the Imam’s sayings, despises daughters. Firdaus states that: “when one of his female children died, my father would eat his supper, my mother would wash his legs, and then he would go to sleep, just as he did every night. When the child that died was a boy, he would beat my mother, then have his supper and lie down to sleep” (El Saadawi 23). Though this practice comes from the Muslim father, it is not Islamic inasmuch as Islam bestows daughters with a respectful position. Being a daughter in true Islam is a blessing to both parents because Prophet Muhammad peace and blessings be upon him (PBUH) says: “Whoever has a daughter and he does not bury her alive, does not insult her, and does not favour his son over her, God will enter him into paradise” (Ibn Hanbal qtd. in Badawi). In Islam, daughters are greatly welcomed and should be treated in equal way with sons. However, in the story, the cultural practice of favoring sons is reflected in the narrative and daughters are mistreated. Such behavior violates the principles of Islam. In this regard, Islamic feminism calls for women’s rights from Islamic sources of

both the Quran and 'Hadith'. However, in some Muslim societies, like Egypt in the story, having a daughter is considered as indignation, and this action actually goes to pre-Islamic practices that humiliate daughters and women. The Islamic feminist Asma Barlas ascertains: "The Qur'an is the only scripture to address the rights of girls...and to raise squarely the problem of fathers' abuse of daughters, something on which not just religious but also secular patriarchies and traditions frequently are silent" (181-182). However, in the story, there is no sign of treating daughters in relation to Islamic principles or any endeavors to reconsider their treatment according to sources of Islam which are the gist of Islamic feminism and an Islamic feminist text. The practice of disdaining daughters is cultural and not religious in the novel.

Another non-Islamic practice that the narrator deals with is female circumcision. Firdaus' mother and another woman circumcise her. However, female circumcision is not fully documented in Islam. It is relevant to African practices. Islamic scholars unanimously agree that religious sources permitting female circumcision are weak and not authentic. Muhammad Lutfi El Sabbagh ascertains: "none aspires to a degree of authenticity which would indicate that female circumcision is obligatory" (17). Thus, the author deals with circumcision which is a heinous African cultural practice in general and an Egyptian one in particular. In Egypt, it is a pharaonic practice that is known as infibulation. In fact, there is a hot debate on this subject, but the general agreement between Muslim scholars is that female circumcision is a cultural practice. Ali Kecia claims the following:

the majority of Muslims do not practice any form of female circumcision and where it is common, it is generally performed by members of all religious groups...The severity of the practice...depends on variables of locale, educational attainment and socio-economic status, rather than religious affiliation. In the majority of Muslim societies, by contrast, female circumcision is virtually unknown. In those regions where it is practiced, it almost always predates Islamization. (129)

Consequently, female circumcision is not relevant to Islam and it is a cultural practice that is done in the name of religion. The novel deals with a case of cultural practice that is assimilated to Islam while it has no foundation in the religious practice and its sources.

The author deals with another harmful situation which is female molestation. The latter is a recurrent theme in the novel. From her early childhood, Firdaus is molested by her childhood boyfriend. Such sexual harassment is a cultural practice, but what is noteworthy is the name of her boyfriend Mohammadian, which refers to an Islamic name relevant to the Prophet Muhammad. Firdaus says: "He would make me lie down beneath a pile of straw, and lift up my galabeya. We played at 'bride and bridegroom'. From some part in my body, where exactly I did not know, would come a sensation of sharp pleasure" (17). Another dangerous molestation is committed by her uncle who is a religious man studying in El Azhar and working in the Ministry of Wakf. First, he seduces her in her house as she states:

My galabeya often slipped up my thighs, but I paid no attention until the moment when I would glimpse my uncle's hand moving slowly from behind the book he was reading to touch my leg...I could feel it travelling up my thigh with a cautious, stealthy, trembling movement. Every time there was the sound of a footstep at the entrance to our house, his hand would withdraw quickly...He was doing to me what Mohammadain had done to me before. In fact, he was doing even more. (17-18)

Despite the fact that Firdaus' uncle is a religious person knowledgeable about Islamic teachings, he performs non-Islamic practices. However, such actions to an international reader seem Islamic practices, especially if they read a literary work written by an author named an Islamic feminist, like Nawal El Saadawi. Firdaus' uncle explains matters to her in terms of sins, but he himself performs the biggest sin of incest when she moves to live with him after the death of her parents. She states:

He took me to the cinema. I saw a woman dancing. Her thighs were naked. And I saw a man hugging a woman. Then he kissed her on the lips. I hid my face....Later, he told me that dancing was a sin, and that kissing a man, too, was a sin....I was trembling all over, seized with a feeling I could not explain, that my uncle's great long fingers would draw close to me after a little while....Then his lips would touch my face and press down on my mouth, and his trembling fingers would feel their way slowly upwards over my thighs. A strange thing was happening to me. (28)

Albeit he is supposed to be a religious man representing Islam, he commits sins that are not relevant to Islam per se.

Another non-Islamic practice is restricting education to only men. In Firdaus' narrative, when she asked her uncle to take her with him to Cairo to study at El Azhar, he answers: "El Azhar was only for men" (20). In addition, when Firdaus obtains her secondary school certificate, the wife of her uncle suggests sending her to the university to get rid of her, but her uncle responds saying: "to the university? To a place where she will be sitting side by side with men?" (47). So, albeit he is a religious person and is supposed to know that there is no difference between men and women in seeking education, he demonstrates cultural practices by preventing Firdaus from education. However, in reality and in true Islam, education is for both men and women. There is no difference between them. Anas ibn Malik reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, "Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim" (Ibn Mājah 224). The word Muslim in Islamic sources refers to both men and women without any discrimination.

The most apparent non-Islamic practice in *Woman at Point Zero* is Firdaus' forced marriage. Her uncle and his wife decide to get rid of Firdaus from their house by marrying her to an old person called Sheikh Mahmoud whose age is over sixty, while she has not turned nineteen years old yet. El Saadawi exposes a dramatic case of non-Islamic marriage. The first transgression of this marriage in the novel is obliging Firdaus to marry without her

consent. The author stresses the fact by using paradoxical behavior. Instead of asking for Firdaus' permission, her uncle and his wife wonder about Mahmoud's acceptance. However, Islamic marriage is based on a daughter's consent to accept her future husband and it endorses freedom of choice. From 'Hadith', "Ibn Abbas reported that a girl came to the Messenger of God, Muhammad peace and blessings be upon him, and she reported that her father had forced her to marry without her consent. The Messenger of God gave her the choice...(between accepting the marriage or invalidating it)" (Ibn Hanbal qtd. in Badawi). In addition, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) also demanded from the family of the girls to: "not marry a non-virgin except on her instruction, nor marry a virgin except with her permission, and her silence may go for permission" (Bukhari qtd. in Tubari). Moreover, Asma Barlas, an Islamic feminist, views that "Muslim marriages often are called consensual contracts of sexuality" (165). Thus, Firdaus' uncle transgresses one important principle of Islamic marriage.

The second violation of Islamic marriage is Firdaus' dowry which is supposed to be a gift to the bride according to the Islamic sources. In the story, the dowry is a matter of bargaining to sell Firdaus at a high price and profiting from the old man. The wife of her uncle says: "I intend to ask him for a big dowry...a hundred pounds, or perhaps even two hundred if he has the money, if he pays a hundred pounds, then Allah will indeed have been generous to us" (49). Then, the uncle responds: "if he accepts to pay one hundred pounds that will be sufficient blessing from Allah. I will be able to pay my debts and buy some underwear, as well as a dress or two for Firdaus" (49). Firdaus' religious uncle and his wife use the name of Allah in matters that are against the principles of Allah and Islam. The Prophet (PBUH) said to a man who wanted to get married: "Look (for something to give as a dowry), even if it is a ring of iron" Agreed upon (Al-Bukhari 4854). Accordingly, Islam facilitates marriage by giving a simple gift to the bride, and her dowry is not a business transaction where she is bought and sold as goods. Furthermore, a bride's dowry is her own property and should not be taken

by another person in the Islamic sources. However, Firdaus' uncle plans to take her dowry to fulfill his needs and pay his debts. Moreover, her uncle speaks in a religious way as he says: "Verily, we are full of gratitude to Allah for everything he has bestowed on us. May He be forever praised and exalted. Verily our hearts are indeed full of thanks to Allah the almighty" (50). As a result, despite the fact that Firdaus' uncle is a religious man in ElAzhar, his actions are cultural and non-Islamic practices, and he distorts the image of Islam, especially for international readers.

Firdaus' forced marriage results in a chasm between her and her husband. The latter shows many non-Islamic practices in his marital relationship that are not congruent with the good treatment of women as recommended in the Islamic sources of the Quran and 'Hadith'. Firdaus' husband Mahmoud is a stingy person, who beats her for trivial matters as she states: "One day he discovered some leftover scraps of food, and started yelling at me so loudly that all the neighbours could hear. After this incident, he got into the habit of beating me whenever he had a reason for it or not. On one occasion he hit me all over with his shoe. My face and body became swollen and bruised" (58). After escaping to her uncle and complaining about her husband, her uncle responds in the following way: "all husbands beat their wives". Then, Firdaus narrates: "my uncle's wife added that her husband often beat her. I said my uncle was a respected Sheikh, well versed in the teachings of religion, and he, therefore, could not possibly be in the habit of beating his wife. She replied that it was precisely men versed in their religion who beat their wives. The precepts of religion permitted such punishment" (59). The cultural practice of beating wives, like Mahmoud's beating of Firdaus is reinforced by a religious man, who is supposed to represent Islamic teachings. Albeit Firdaus' uncle is a knowledgeable person about Islam, his practices reflect cultural deeds that distort the image of Islam inasmuch as beating in the Quran means separation and not physical beating. In addition, after Firdaus' complaint, her husband continues to beat her severely as she states: "One day he hit me with his

heavy stick until the blood ran from my nose and ears" (60). As a result, she runs away from her house forever to become a prostitute.

Beating in the Quran has different meanings. According to the Arab dictionary "Lisan Al Arab" by Ibn Mandhor, the word beating has many interpretations. In addition to its meaning of striking, beating refers to separation, parting and discontinuing any interaction. Generally speaking, men take this verse as an excuse to beat women. It is written: "But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance - [first] advise them; [then if they persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally], strike them. But if they obey you [once more], seek no means against them. Indeed, Allah is ever Exalted and Grand" (Quran 4-34). Beating wives in this context means separation between the spouses as the last resolution after their separation in bed. It is not relevant to physical beating. Asma Barlas claims that "we should be able to admit that reading this āyah as a license to batter wives...is not acceptable in that it is not the best meaning we can derive from the Qur'ān...it contradicts the Qur'ān's view of sexual equality and its teaching that marriages should be based in love, forgiveness, harmony and *sukūn*" (189). In addition, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) expresses his anger towards a man's behavior by stating: "How does anyone of you beat his wife as he beats the stallion camel and then embrace (sleep with) her?" (Al-Bukhari 6042). Hence, beating wives is not an Islamic practice and it is not relevant to Islamic feminism because the latter is mainly based on the principles of Islam in relation to women's rights, which are absent in Firdaus' story. More severely, her uncle who is supposed to represent Islam, instead of providing a model of a good husband respecting Islamic teaching in dealing with women and wives, reinforces cultural practices by beating his wife. Consequently, Firdaus' constant beating by her husband leads to the beginning of her tragic life; the life of prostitution.

In fact, being a mistress or a prostitute are both against the principles of Islam. They represent cultural practices and violations of Islamic teachings. In Islam, adultery, in its different forms including fornication and prostitution, is clearly prohibited as

it is mentioned in the Quran "And do not approach unlawful sexual intercourse. Indeed, it is ever an immorality and is evil as a way" (17- 32). However in the story, Firdaus was first forced to be a prostitute by Bayoumi who raped her, then he brought his friends as well. Later, she opts for this profession by her own will after her encounter with Sharifa, who encourages her to practice prostitution. Firdaus is proud of her profession. She is clearly satisfied by her own choice of being a prostitute because comparing her life to other women's lives, she views that she has more freedom than other women who suffer under patriarchal practices. She proudly announces: "because I was intelligent I preferred to be a free prostitute, rather than an enslaved wife" (124). Hence, for her, albeit prostitution is condemned, it is better than living under the shackles of patriarchy as a married woman.

All the aforementioned practices used in the novel are relevant to culture and not Islam. That is to say, Islamic feminism is absent in El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* inasmuch as the practices in terms of disdaining girls, female circumcision, molestation, preventing women from education, forced marriages, beating wives and prostitution reflect culture rather than Islam. Most importantly, there is no condemnation from the part of female characters to change their miserable situation. In case there is, it is directed to a wrong perverse person, like Firdaus' complaint to her uncle. Yet, there is no change after her objection. The tenets of Islamic feminism are to represent women's rights according to the Quran and religious sources and to condemn cultural practices that violate women's rights. In this regard, Danielle Dunand Zimmerman views that Islam does not include patriarchal practices that are the outcomes of culture and not religion per se. For Zimmerman, the aim of Islamic feminism is to indict cultural practices that distort the image of Islam and liberate Muslim women from Western feminism that advocate the repudiation of religion with all its form (148). However, in Firdaus' story, there is no repudiation from her part or another character to make any change. Rather, she selects the path of prostitution which is highly denounced in Islam.

One essential aspect in the story that shows that it is not an Islamic feminist work is the fortification of patriarchy by religious men. The novel demonstrates their religious hypocrisy by invoking Allah's names in daily life and prayers, but performing non-Islamic practices. Firdaus states: "Sheikh Mahmoud, as he kneeled in prayer, his eyes half closed, of the glances he stole now and then at my plate; and of my uncle as he followed the lines in his book with peering eyes while his hand stole out from behind, searching for my thigh" (90). Firdaus' husband and uncle are hypocrite persons. Albeit her uncle is supposed to be a religious man representing Islam and Muslims' practices of Islam, his social practices in his culture oppose the Islamic teachings and reinforce patriarchal practices that oppress women. He practices incest with Firdaus, marries her to Sheikh Mahmoud without her consent and violates the dowry principle in her marriage. He informs Firdaus that beating women in Islam is a common practice. His deeds are not congruent with the principles of Islam in dealing with women. In fact, El Saadawi clearly castigates patriarchal practices in the Arab society through such characters. However, her remedy to such practices is not by referring to the principles of Islamic feminism, which seeks to revive women's consciousness to realize their rights in Islam. She provides a radical solution to Firdaus' downfall by willingly embracing prostitution and preferring prostitution to marriage. The story portrays the negative effects of patriarchy which is fortified by men in general and religious men in particular.

Taking into consideration that the story is based on a true story, this gives the actions more reliability and credibility. Eustache Palmer describes El Saadawi by saying: "she probed the oppression of women in Islamic societies and their deprivation of rights with a particular focus on the interplay between sexuality and violence and shed historic light on the situation of women in Islam and poke out diversely against the institutionalized circumcision and veiling women" (150). Palmer here uses the words Islam and Islamic. Yet, what is presented in the story is not representative of Islam and Islamic feminism. Rather, the story represents

cultural practices that deviate from true Islamic deeds in relation to women's issues. Thus, basing the novel on a true story greatly contributes to reinforcing distorted images about Islam. Indeed, the practices are real and exist in Egypt, but they are not congruent with the principles of Islam and Islamic feminism.

Therefore, the analysis of *Woman at Point Zero* shows that it does not reveal Islamic feminism despite the fact that many scholars label El Saadawi an Islamic feminist. Different critics, like Miriam Cooke and Haideh Moghissi have described her as an Islamic feminist. Haideh Moghissi states that "Islamic feminists like Assia Djebar ... Nawal El Saadawi... are learning how to take advantage of the transnationalism of Islam to empower themselves as women and as Muslims" (380). Yet, El Saadawi's feminism is not related to religion. It is linked to culture, and it reflects Western ideas of feminism. It is generally acknowledged that Western feminism is mainly secular representing culture that is far away from religion. Western feminists strongly criticize religion that suffocates women's freedom, and they embrace liberal and secular ideas for their feminism. Thus, El Saadawi consciously or unconsciously represents non-Islamic practices. She is not herself claiming to be an Islamic feminist, but the use of such naming is problematic.

Actually, El Saadawi, the godmother of "Islamic feminism", is influenced by Western feminism. She is often described as "the Simone de Beauvoir of the Arab world" (Nawal El Saadawi). For many critics, she is the true representative of Islamic feminism. Yet, she is greatly influenced by Western writings and culture and her feminism is a hybrid of Arab and Western feminism. Although she was educated in Egypt and lived there for a long period, she and her writings are not welcomed in Egypt due to her ideas and political views. She is regarded as an outcast and apostate. She was imprisoned by the president of Egypt Anwar Sadat. Then, in 1988, she was officially obliged to flee Egypt to live in different countries and to teach in various universities. For this reason, a throng of critics, like Jamal El-Ghitany, Sabry Hafez and George Tarabishi view that Nawal El Saadawi is not

a bona fide Islamic feminist because she lives in exile and cannot fully understand and accurately represent Muslim women's position. Jamal El-Ghitany says: "El Saadawi is living in America because she wants a Nobel Prize. She is writing for the West, she cannot feel the true problems of women" (qtd. in Amireh 238). In addition, her feminism represents culture and it does not reflect the tenets of Islamic feminism.

Although El Saadawi is not greatly welcomed in her country, she is well received by Western universities and audience. Amal Amireh views in her article "Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World" that there are many reasons behind El Saadawi's popularity in the West. Her simple and direct style helps in the spread of her writings to a large audience along with her selection of prominent publishing houses, like Zed Books of London and Beacon Press in Boston that accelerate her readership (217-231). However, for Amireh, the most outstanding reason for El Saadawi's celebrity is her satisfaction of Western audience's expectations about Muslim and Arab people in general and women in particular. Westerners already have stereotypes about Muslim and Arab women. They view them as oppressed women by both men and Islam. The latter is always in the forefront while dealing with women's mistreatment and subjugation. Hence, El Saadawi's conscious or unconscious denouncing to Islam is greatly welcomed by the Western audience.

Furthermore, El Saadawi is vehemently criticized by a myriad of Arab and Muslim critics due to reinforcing Western stereotypes about Muslim women instead of defending their position. Amireh states that "El Saadawi and her Arab feminist work are consumed by a Western audience in a context saturated by stereotypes of Arab culture and that this context of reception to a large extent ends up rewriting both the writer and her texts according to scripted first world narratives about Arab women's oppression" (215). Thus, instead of representing Muslim and Arab women from the perspective of Islamic feminism, she indirectly confirms the negative misrepresentations of Arab and Muslim women that the Western people

generally have about Arabs and Muslims. So, El Saadawi allows "her works to be used to confirm prevailing prejudices about Arab and Muslim culture" (228). Consequently, she portrays and represents the Western image about Muslim women.

El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* portrays cultural practices that oppose the teachings of Islam. The situation of women presented in the novel is real in Egypt. However, the aforementioned non-feminist practices are cultural rather than Islamic deeds inasmuch as Islam bestows women with many rights that are violated by culture. Most importantly, calling El Saadawi an Islamic feminist contributes to the fallacies about Islam to believe that each single action in the novel is relevant to Islam.

In fact, the use of Islamic feminism is problematic inasmuch as it is an onerous task to represent religious practices while many Arab and Muslims' social practices oppose Islamic teachings. So, it would be much better calling feminism in the Arab world as Arab feminism or Muslim feminism instead of Islamic feminism because there is a big difference between Islam as a religion that advocates women's rights and Muslims as practitioners of Islam. Although Islamic and Arab feminism are used interchangeably, Arab feminism is more appropriate to reflect cultural practices of Muslim people in relation to gender issues. Moreover, calling an Arab or Muslim feminist an Islamic feminist, like El Saadawi, perpetuates Western orientalist images about Islam, especially if these practices are presented as Islamic and not cultural deeds in internationally recognized literary works. They

would add directly or indirectly to the already existing stereotypes about Muslims and Muslim women.

Conclusion:

The analysis of El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* vindicates that it does not reveal aspects of Islamic feminism that stems its principles from Islam. Although El Saadawi is worldwide known as an Islamic feminist, her novel reveals cultural and non-Islamic practices in terms of disdaining daughters, female circumcision, molestation, preventing women from education, forced marriages, beating wives and prostitution. Thus, the presentation of cultural practices under the name of Islamic feminism and the use of the label of Islamic feminist directly or indirectly perpetuate negative stereotypes about Islam that is already considered as an anti-feminist religion by the West. As a result, El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* is not an Islamic feminist work. It would be much better calling El Saadawi an Arab or a Muslim feminist inasmuch as she portrays in her work cultural practices that are irrelevant to Islamic teachings in relation to women's rights. Yet, this is only one possible interpretation of El Saadawi's work. Other literary works by the author may reveal Islamic feminism which is open to future research.

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