

Woman at Point Zero



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF NAWAL EL SAADAWI

Saadawi was born the second of nine children, to a family that was progressive, yet slave to certain traditions. At six years old, her father had her circumcised yet also provided her an education and encouraged her to think and speak forthrightly. Both of Saadawi's parents died early, leaving her as the sole guardian for her younger siblings. Saadawi studied in Cairo, where she graduated as a doctor in 1955. As a physician, she realized that many women's physical and psychological ills were rooted in class oppression and gendered oppression. After two brief marriages, she married a prominent communist activist in 1964, whom had previously spent 13 years as a political prisoner. In 1972, while working as a public health director and editor of a prominent health journal, Saadawi published *Women and Sex*, which catalogued the various ways that patriarchal society dominates women and violates their personal agency. Although the controversial feminist book was widely successful in Egypt and abroad, it cost Saadawi both her directorship and the journal. Saadawi then transitioned to researching women's neurosis for a prominent medical university, and then served as an adviser for the United Nations. During this time, she wrote and published *Woman at Point Zero* based upon meeting Firdaus as a part of Saadawi's case studies of women at Qanatir Prison. In 1981, Saadawi helped launch the feminist magazine *Confrontation*, which led President Anwar Sadat—who had already considered Saadawi a dangerous public figure—to order Saadawi's arrest. She spent one year in Qanatir Prison—the same prison she wrote about in *Woman at Point Zero* in 1975—but was released after military officers assassinated Sadat. Saadawi continued her activism in Egypt until 1988, until Islamists threatened her life. She took sanctuary in the U.S., teaching at several prestigious universities until she could return to Egypt in 1996. Back in her home country, Saadawi continued her activism. She ran for president in 2005, protested in Tahrir Square in 2011—an event which triggered the Egyptian Revolution and downfall of President Hosni Mubarak—and campaigned for the secularization of public education in Egypt. Saadawi has two children, and divorced her third husband in 2010.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In contrast to Firdaus's experiences of gender inequality in *Woman at Point Zero*, most scholars believe that women in ancient Egypt were equal with men, and remained so through many dynasties until the introduction of patriarchal European ideals in 1798, when the French invaded into Egypt. However,

some researchers also trace the practice of female circumcision (often referred to as female genital mutilation) to Egypt in the fifth century B.C.E. Control of Egypt changed hands several times until the British Empire took control, mixing its own socially repressive ideals with conservative religious influences that further repressed women. The birth of women's activism in Egypt also occurred under British colonial rule, however, when women participated in the violent clashes of the 1919 Revolution, protesting against the foreign powers. In 1923, activist Huda Sha'arawi established the Egyptian Feminist Union, launching Egypt's first phase of outright feminism and incorporating it into the larger feminist movement occurring across Europe and the U.S. Feminist movements continued to rise throughout Egypt for the next 30 years, led by activist Doria Shafik, who actively challenged the government and led 1,500 women to storm parliament and demand equal status, rights, and pay for women. However, when Gamal Abdel Nasser and the military overthrow the recently-independent monarchy, he order all political parties and groups to dissolve, which coincidentally banned all feminist leagues and movements. As Nasser's regime fell out of power, Nawal El Saadawi initiated a new phase of feminist action with the publication of *Women and Sex*, which reoriented much of feminism's energy toward combating religious fundamentalism's repression of women, which has remained a primary goal for the last several decades. A feminist victory occurred in 2014, when Egypt legally criminalized sexual harassment after a study found that 99.3 percent of Egyptian women have been sexually harassed by men.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like much of Saadawi's work, *Woman at Point Zero* has become a bedrock piece for Egyptian feminism. Her nonfiction, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, catalogues her own experiences of gendered abuse and atrocities against woman that she saw as a rural doctor. The book also includes a more elaborate address of religion and sexism, arguing that such oppression cannot truly be supported by Islam or any religion which claims to value human dignity. Saadawi's novel, *God Dies by the Nile*, continues this exploration through a story of a poor village dominated by a lecherous mayor. The novel explores how religion and progressive society may coexist and asks why God won't intervene in the face of such oppression. Beyond Saadawi's writing, prominent feminist Huda Sha'arawi's *The Harem Years* recounts her upbringing in a private harem in the last years of colonial Cairo, when it was controlled by the British Empire. Tracking Egypt's social evolution more broadly, Leila Ahmed's *A Border Passage* depicts her family's political action and persecution during several significant social

revolutions, including the end of the European colonial era, the overthrow of the Egyptian Monarchy by Gamal Abdel Nasser, the birth of Israel's sovereign state, and the rise in Arab Nationalism.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Woman at Point Zero*
- **When Written:** 1974
- **Where Written:** Cairo, Egypt
- **When Published:** 1975
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Creative Nonfiction
- **Setting:** Cairo, Egypt
- **Climax:** Firdaus kills Marzouk and threatens the Arab prince, which leads to her arrest.
- **Antagonist:** Female oppression
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Searching for Firdaus. When Saadawi was thrown in Qanatir Prison nine years after Firdaus's death, she often found herself looking for Firdaus's face amongst the other inmates, wishing that her hero was still somehow alive.

Quick Work. After Firdaus was executed in 1974, Saadawi felt she could do nothing else until she'd immortalized Firdaus's story. With this energy, she wrote *Woman at Point Zero* in one week.



PLOT SUMMARY

Egyptian psychiatrist Nawal El Saadawi visits a woman named Firdaus in Qanatir Prison, where she is about to be executed for murder. Firdaus narrates her life story.

Firdaus spends her early childhood in a rural village. Her father is terribly abusive and deceitful, though every week at the mosque he pretends to be religiously devout. Firdaus has little memory of her mother, though she knows that her mother had her circumcised when she was still too young to understand what it meant—though not before her first sexual experience with a young boy named Mohammadain. Firdaus's uncle routinely sexually abuses her, but she still likes being with him because he teaches her to read and write.

When Firdaus's parents die, her uncle takes her with him to Cairo and enrolls her in school. She enjoys her life with him and excels as a student. However, after Firdaus marries an upper-class wife he becomes cool and distant, and abandons Firdaus to a secondary boarding school. Firdaus thrives here as well, though her painful childhood troubles her. One night, her

teacher Miss Iqbal gives her comfort, and as Firdaus holds her hand she feels a muted stir of sexual pleasure, though she does not understand what this feeling means. Firdaus expects that Miss Iqbal feels it too, but her teacher never recognizes it or pays Firdaus special attention, which disappoints Firdaus.

Although Firdaus graduates secondary school as one of the top students in the country, her uncle refuses to send her to university, since his niece studying alongside young men would reflect poorly on him as a public figure. Instead, at his wife's suggestion, he marries Firdaus to Sheikh Mahmoud, a wretched old man who is over 60 years old, while Firdaus is only 18. Before the wedding, Firdaus briefly tries to run away, but realizes that the world is too frightening for her as a woman. Sheikh Mahmoud routinely beats and rapes Firdaus, and she learns to withdraw from herself, mentally disassociating from her own body to endure the abuse.

Firdaus runs to her uncle for shelter, but he is unsympathetic, so she runs away again. A seemingly kind named Bayoumi takes her in and treats her well for several months. However, when Firdaus decides she wants to work and live independently, Bayoumi beats and rapes her and starts keeping her locked in his house all day, pimping her out to his friends at night. A neighbor helps Firdaus escape, and within a day she meets Sharifa, a wealthy woman who brings Firdaus to live with her in her lavish apartment. Sharifa teaches Firdaus that she is beautiful and can make men pay anything she wants for her body. However, Sharifa also pimps Firdaus out to men and keeps all of the money for herself. Firdaus eventually runs away from Sharifa as well, and begins working as an independent prostitute. She learns how to entice men and demand massive fees, and grows wealthy enough to have her own apartment, servants, and a cook. However, when one of Firdaus's friends tells her that she is "not respectable," she decides to leave prostitution and try to build a respectable life for herself.

Firdaus takes a low-wage job for an industrial company and lives in a tiny, dirty apartment. Even so, she feels free. However, after several years, Firdaus realizes that the company executives pressure their female employees to have sex with them for favors or promotions. She decides that women in lawful professions are given as little respect by men as prostitutes are, but a prostitute can make a better living. Meanwhile, Firdaus briefly falls in love with Ibrahim, a union leader at her company who seems principled and noble. They have a brief affair, during which she feels so in love that she tells him every secret of her life and her past. She has sex with him willingly, for her own pleasure. However, Ibrahim suddenly betrays her and announces his engagement to the company chairman's daughter, which will benefit his career. This breaks Firdaus's heart, and she realizes that men like Ibrahim trade tenderness for sex, which is little different from those who buy sex with money.

Firdaus returns to living as a prostitute and making good

money. However, a pimp named Marzouk manages to take control of her through his contacts in the police and the courts. He starts taking the majority of her income. When Firdaus decides to leave Marzouk, he tries to stop her, but she recognizes fear in his **eyes**. When Marzouk strikes her, she strikes him back, then stabs him to death with his own knife. Firdaus realizes that she can act against men and has nothing to fear; she can say and do as she truly feels. Immediately after, an Arab prince solicits Firdaus and pays her 3,000 pounds. Midway through sex, Firdaus refuses to continue and shreds the prince's **money** in front of him. She tells him that all men are criminals and says she ought to kill the prince where he stands, since he is insignificant and corrupt. When she strikes him, the prince believes her and screams for the police. The police arrest her as a murderer, though Firdaus knows they are really just afraid of a woman who is bold enough to speak the "savage" truth. They throw her in jail, where she now awaits her execution.

Saadawi listens to Firdaus finish her story. After she finishes, the two women sit in silence until men take Firdaus away to execute her. Although Firdaus is dead, her voice remains in Saadawi's head long after, and she realizes that she feels ashamed of her own fear and weakness compared to Firdaus's courage.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Firdaus – Firdaus is the protagonist of the story and the primary narrator, based on an actual woman Nawal El Saadawi met in Qanatir Prison. Firdaus is born in rural Egypt to a poor family in the mid-20th century. From her earliest years, she experiences sexism and abuse. Firdaus's father beats her mother and demonstrates complete disregard for his daughters. Firdaus's mother has her circumcised as a young girl, cutting off her clitoris with a razor blade. The only adult with whom Firdaus has a relatively positive relationship is her uncle, who she enjoys spending time with even though he sexually abuses her as a child. When Firdaus's parents die, her uncle adopts her and takes her to Cairo, where he puts her through primary and secondary school. When she graduates, her uncle marries her off to a grotesque old man named Sheikh Mahmoud, who rapes and beats her until she runs away. A seemingly kind man named Bayoumi takes her in for several months, but once Firdaus decides she wants to find a job and be independent, he beats and rapes her and traps her in his house, prostituting her out to his friends each night. Firdaus eventually escapes and meets a woman named Sharifa, who teaches Firdaus her own high value while also pimping her out. For a brief time, Firdaus leaves prostitution to find a lawful job and lead a "respectable" life. However, after being betrayed by her lover, Ibrahim, Firdaus realizes that all relationships

between men and women, even love affairs, are essentially transactional: men trade money or favor or tenderness for access to women's bodies. Firdaus then returns to prostitution, but when a pimp named Marzouk tries to control her, she stabs him to death with his own knife. This shows her that she has the power to react to men and call them "criminals," as she sees them. When Firdaus threatens a prince, the police arrest her and charge her with murder, since they are afraid of such a bold woman. She chooses to accept her death, rather than appeal her case and continue living in a male-dominated world.

Nawal El Saadawi – Nawal El Saadawi is the author and secondary narrator who recounts the days before she meets Firdaus in prison and her reaction to Firdaus's story. Saadawi is a psychiatrist, interviewing female inmates to study neurosis. Before she meets Firdaus, she feels the same sense of anticipation that she's only known from romantic encounters. After Firdaus is executed and Saadawi leaves, she finds that she feels small and insignificant compared to Firdaus's strength.

Firdaus's Uncle – Firdaus's uncle is a religious scholar and later a government official. He teaches Firdaus to read and write, and is her only childhood mentor, but he also sexually abuses her frequently. When Firdaus's parents die, he takes her to Cairo with him to live and attend school. However, when he marries an upper-class wife who does not like Firdaus, he marries her off to an old man Sheikh Mahmoud in order to be rid of Firdaus and take the dowry. Although Firdaus's uncle is a religious man, he beats and rapes his wife, demonstrating the hypocrisy of religious men in Firdaus's world.

Sheikh Mahmoud – Sheikh Mahmoud marries Firdaus when she is 18 and he is over 60. On his face, a large infection dribbles blood and pus, and it sometimes drips on Firdaus when he kisses her face. He is a miserly old man, who does not work or go out but spends all of his time watching Firdaus take care of his home, jumping on any opportunity to criticize her. He also regularly beats and rapes Firdaus. After he hits Firdaus so hard that blood comes out of her ears and nose, she runs away from him and never sees him again.

Sharifa Salah El Dine – Sharifa gives Firdaus shelter after she runs away from Bayoumi. She is a wealthy woman and lives in a luxurious apartment that overlooks the Nile River. Sharifa teaches Firdaus she must be "hard" to survive and must set her own value. Through this, she helps Firdaus recognize her own beauty and intelligence. However, although Sharifa seems kind, she too pimps Firdaus out to wealthy men, but keeps all of the money for herself.

Ibrahim – Ibrahim works at Firdaus's industrial company and leads a "revolutionary" group campaigning for workers' rights. Firdaus and Ibrahim briefly fall in love and tell each other all about their lives, their pasts, and their fears, baring their souls to each other. Firdaus willingly has sex with Ibrahim for her own pleasure. However, Ibrahim betrays Firdaus and marries the company chairman's daughter, since this will benefit his career.

This betrayal crushes Firdaus, and she decides that principled men use their tenderness to get sex for free, rather than paying for it.

Bayoumi – Bayoumi is the owner of a coffee shop, who gives Firdaus shelter after she runs away from Sheikh Mahmoud. For the first several months, Bayoumi is kind and generous to Firdaus and never tries to take advantage of her. However, when Firdaus decides she will move out and become independent, Bayoumi beats and rapes her, and starts locking her in his house all day and prostituting her out to his friends at night.

Firdaus's Mother – Firdaus remembers nothing about her mother except that she loved her, and that her **eyes** seem to watch over Firdaus when she was a small child. Whenever Firdaus feels love for another person, their eyes reflect the same quality as her mother's eyes, appearing as if light pours out of them. Despite Firdaus's affection for her mother, she is also the person who coordinates Firdaus's circumcision as a young girl.

The prince – The prince solicits Firdaus right after she murders Marzouk and kills her fear, paying her a massive sum of 3,000 pounds. Midway through sex, Firdaus stops, tears the prince's money to pieces, and says that she ought to kill him since he is just an "insect" who spends his people's taxes on prostitutes for himself. The prince calls the police and accuses Firdaus of being a killer, and they arrest her.

Miss Iqbal – Miss Iqbal is one of Firdaus's secondary school teachers. When Miss Iqbal finds Firdaus crying alone one night, she sits with her. Firdaus thinks Miss Iqbal's **eyes** look like her mother's, as if light pours out of them, and when she takes Miss Iqbal's hand she feels the dim stirring of sexual pleasure. Miss Iqbal becomes Firdaus's first love, though neither she nor Firdaus truly realizes it. When Firdaus leaves school without ever having another encounter with Miss Iqbal, she is heartbroken.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Firdaus's Father – Firdaus's father is a poor farmer who pretends to be religiously devout. However, he beats his wife, steals from his neighbors, and neglects his children, demonstrating both his own hypocrisy and the oppressively sexist world into which Firdaus is born.

Marzouk – Marzouk is a powerful and well-connected pimp, who takes control of Firdaus after she returns to prostitution. Marzouk takes the majority of Firdaus's earnings, so she decides to leave. When Marzouk tries to stop her, she recognizes fear in his **eyes** and stabs him to death.

Mohammadain – Mohammadain is Firdaus's childhood friend. Before her mother circumcises her, Mohammadain and Firdaus often sneak away to play "bride and bridegroom," where they sexually explore each other. Playing this game is how Firdaus

has her first and only experience of sexual pleasure uninhibited by genital mutilation.

Firdaus's Stepmother – After Firdaus's mother presumably dies, her stepmother takes her place. All Firdaus remembers of her is that she knew she wasn't her real mother.

Firdaus's Uncle's Wife – Firdaus's Uncle's wife comes from an upper-class family and hates Firdaus. She encourages her husband to marry Firdaus off to Sheikh Mahmoud.

Fawzy – Fawzy is one of Sharifa's clients who tries to take Firdaus away from her. When Sharifa resists him, Fawzy rapes Sharifa, and Firdaus escapes while they sleep.

Di'aa – Di'aa is one of Firdaus's friends while she is an independent prostitute. Di'aa tells Firdaus that, despite Firdaus's success, she is "not respectable," which deeply wounds Firdaus and compels her to leave prostitution and find a legal job.

Wafeya – Wafeya is Firdaus's friend in secondary school, who suggests that Firdaus is in love with Miss Iqbal.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



PERVASIVE SEXISM AND OPPRESSION

Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* tells the story of Firdaus—an Egyptian woman on death row in the 1970s for killing a pimp—who suffers oppression and abuse from men for her entire life. As Saadawi narrates from Firdaus's perspective, every single man in her life seeks to abuse or exploit her based on her female identity. Although Firdaus is a natural survivor, her story is unrelentingly bleak as she goes from oppressive situation to oppressive situation, with no hope for positive change. Firdaus's account depicts pervasive sexism in Egyptian society in the 1970s and demonstrates how it plagues women from birth to death, exerting powerful influence over every aspect of their lives. As a child, Firdaus's friends and family members oppress and exploit her for being born a woman, demonstrating how pervasive sexism affects women from the earliest years of their life. Firdaus's only recollections of her father are negative. Every night she watches him "beat his wife and make her bite the dust." Firdaus has many siblings, but they often die of dysentery. When a son dies, Firdaus's father gets angry and beats her mother; when a daughter dies, he eats his dinner and goes to sleep like any other day. Firdaus's father's utter disregard for his wife and daughters suggests that Firdaus's

family structure is inherently sexist and places no value whatsoever on women and girls. As young children, Firdaus and her friend Mohammad often sneak away to play “bride and bridegroom,” a game in which they explore each other’s bodies—this is how Firdaus first experiences sexual pleasure. However, before she is old enough to understand her body or where the pleasure comes from, Firdaus’s mother has her circumcised, removing her clitoris with a razor blade. For the rest of Firdaus’s life, during any sexual experience, she can sense that the pleasure is missing, “like a dream remembered from a distant past,” but can never quite recover it. Firdaus never has any say in her genital mutilation, suggesting that even at any early age, she has no agency or control over her own body. Throughout her young childhood, Firdaus’s uncle provides her sole affectionate relationship with an adult. She recalls, “My uncle was closer to me than my father.” Although her uncle teaches her to read, puts her in elementary school, and eventually adopts her after both parents die, he also sexually molests her from an early age. Firdaus learns to expect his hands reaching for her with a “grasping, almost brutal insistence” and does not try to resist him, seemingly because of his authority as a man and his affection toward her. Firdaus’s only remotely positive relationship with a man is still sexually exploitative, suggesting that her whole childhood is framed by sexism and oppression from men.

Although Firdaus is intelligent and capable, her uncle’s sexist ideals prevent her from pursuing her full potential as a scholar or professional, suggesting that society’s pervasive sexism keeps women from reaching their true potential. After Firdaus’s parents die, her uncle adopts her and puts her through primary and secondary school at an all-girls boarding school, where she excels—which suggests that without men oppressing or exploiting her, Firdaus is free to reach her own high potential. Upon graduating secondary school, Firdaus ranks “second in the school and seventh countrywide.” She is obviously a talented student, and dreams of becoming a “head of state,” though she knows this is impossible due to her gender, suggesting that societal sexism causes Firdaus to limit her own aspirations. However, when her uncle’s new wife wants to “be rid of [Firdaus] by sending her to the university,” Firdaus’s uncle refuses, insisting that his niece studying alongside men would look indecorous and reflect poorly on him, since he is a religious scholar and public figure. Despite Firdaus’s intellect, her uncle’s sexist beliefs about women’s role in society prematurely end her education and stop her from reaching her full potential as a scholar. Instead of letting Firdaus study, Firdaus’s uncle and aunt marry her off to Sheikh Mahmoud, a grotesque old man who pays a hefty dowry for Firdaus, effectively buying her from her family. Sheikh Mahmoud routinely beats and rapes her until she runs away and wanders the streets, desperate for shelter and a new life. Unable to find a lawful job with her secondary school certificate, Firdaus spends most of her adult life as a prostitute, exploited and abused by several different pimps

until she becomes her own manager. Her uncle’s refusal to let her study in university, based solely on his sexist ideals, sets Firdaus down a path of hardship and exploitation, demonstrating that personal and societal sexism oppress women by withholding them from their true potential and forcing them into lives of desperation and abuse.

When Firdaus finally leaves prostitution and works for an industrial company, she finds that company executives regularly harass women and pressure them to have sex with them, suggesting that sexism and oppression even dominate career women’s lives. Although Firdaus refuses to have sex with her superiors—not for their lack of trying—she watches her female co-workers “offer their bodies and their physical efforts every night in return for a meal, or a good yearly report, or just to ensure that they would not be treated unfairly” and realizes “that a female employee is more afraid of losing her job than a prostitute is of losing her life.” That is, women’s fear of losing their jobs allows powerful men to prey on them. Firdaus’s account suggests that even for professional, independent women, pervasive sexism dominates their lives and has an outsized effect on their careers. If even working women, who earn their own living and are not dependent on a husband or father, suffer pervasive sexism, then every level of society appears to be rife with gendered oppression. No woman escapes it. Firdaus’s testimony is unrelentingly dark, suggesting that pervasive sexism exists on every level of Egyptian society, plaguing women from birth to death. Though the story itself offers no hope for women, it represents the very real need for feminism and women’s liberation in the Egypt in the 1970s.



PROSTITUTION AND TRANSACTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Although Firdaus (an Egyptian woman in the 1970s) is smart and once excelled as a student, she spends most of her adult life as a prostitute, first by coercion and later by choice. Because of her role as a prostitute, the men who pay for her services hypocritically scorn her for trading sex for **money**. However, even when Firdaus leaves prostitution behind, she discovers that society expects women to trade their bodies for various gains in every environment and scenario. Through Firdaus’s experiences in and out of prostitution, the book argues that although society looks down on prostitutes, all relationships between men and women in a patriarchal society are essentially transactional, hardly different from prostitution.

Although prostitution seems common in Egypt, people often demean Firdaus for the life she lives, indicating that society views transactional sex—having sex for money—as “not respectable,” even when much of that society takes part in it. After Firdaus runs away from her husband, Sheikh Mahmoud, a seemingly kind man named Bayoumi lets her live in his house with him for several months. However, when Firdaus decides

she wants to find a job and be independent, Bayoumi beats her and locks her in his house. He starts raping her each night when he comes home, and lets other men enter and have sex with her as well, beginning Firdaus's life as a prostitute. Bayoumi and the others often call her "slut, bitch," reinforcing their disregard for her and her humanity. When Firdaus escapes Bayoumi, she wanders the streets until a policeman picks her up. The policeman berates her, saying, "You're a prostitute, and it's my duty to arrest you [...] to clean up the country, and protect respectable families from the likes of you." Even so, the policeman offers her money to have sex with him, suggesting that society at large condemns women who have sex for money—including those who have been coerced into prostitution—even while paying for their services. Firdaus eventually works independently, still operating as a prostitute but charging such high fees that she becomes wealthy with a large apartment, good food, and servants. Even so, Firdaus's friend Di'aa—who also pays to have sex with her—tells her that she is "not respectable," suggesting that regardless of one's financial success, society still looks down on any form of transactional sexual relationship.

Firdaus leaves prostitution for several years to lead a normal life, become a "respectable" woman, and even fall in love, but she soon discovers that all relationships between men and women are essentially transactional. With her secondary school certificate, Firdaus finds work for an industrial company, though it pays so little that she must live in a much worse apartment than she did as an independent prostitute. Even so, she initially considers the sacrifice worthwhile, saying, "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." Although poor again, Firdaus believes she is freed from being demeaned by society and exploited by men. However, before long she realizes that most women in her company have sex with their superiors to earn better treatment or avoid losing their jobs. She posits that just as she used to trade sex for money, her coworkers trade sex for favors. Since they can effectively buy their female employees' bodies, the male superiors still look down upon the women. Firdaus observes, "I realized that as a prostitute I had been looked upon with more respect, been valued more highly than all of the female employees, myself included." Her words indicate that, although society disrespected her as a prostitute, this is no different than male society's disrespect for women in general. Firdaus falls in love with a man at her company named Ibrahim, a principled revolutionary leader. For a brief time, they are happy together. She has sex with him willingly—the only time in her life that Firdaus reports having sex for pleasure. However, when Ibrahim abruptly leaves her and marries a wealthy woman, Firdaus is crushed. She feels that Ibrahim simply used her, and decides that "men with principles were not really different from the rest," because they use their principles and kind words to get "what other men buy for money."

Firdaus's realization suggests that even in romantic relationships, men only trade their tenderness for sex, making the relationship just as transactional as prostitution, albeit less honest.

Firdaus ultimately returns to prostitution, since both parties are at least honest about their sexual transaction. It also pays better, giving her more agency. She concludes that since men control the world, they "force women to sell their bodies at a price, and that the lowest paid body is that of a wife," since a wife is not paid, and her husband owns her (by Egyptian custom). She goes on, "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." Firdaus's words suggest that, in a world run by men, any relationship between a man and a woman—whether an affair, marriage, or employment contract—is transactional, little different from outright prostitution. Firdaus's view of relationships between men and women is certainly cynical, but reflects the reality of living as a woman in male-dominated Egypt in the mid-20th century.



FEAR AND SURVIVAL

After decades of sexism and abuse, Firdaus, an Egyptian woman in the 1970s, sees the whole world as a conflict between men and women, "masters" and "slaves," governed by fear. As a child and then as a wife, professional woman, and prostitute, Firdaus lives in constant fear of men and what they can do to her, which keeps her in a subservient position. However, when Firdaus kills a man who exploits her, she feels her fear diminish and finds that she has the power to act and fight, to call men what they are: criminals. Firdaus's transformation from subservient, fearful victim to fearsome woman suggests that men use fear to hold women down and stop them from speaking the truth about women's oppression in society.

Because of her constant oppression and abuse, Firdaus's life is full of fear, suggesting that fear plagues all women who live in oppressive, male-dominated societies. When Firdaus learns she will be married to Sheikh Mahmoud, she briefly tries to run away to avoid the horror of an arranged marriage. However, as night falls and she wanders the streets alone, she feels a pair of **eyes** watching her from the darkness, wandering over her body. The feeling terrifies Firdaus so severely that she runs back to her uncle's house and submits to the awful and abusive marriage, demonstrating that general fear of the wide world causes her to accept her more specific fear of oppressive situations. Both Sheikh Mahmoud and the pimp Bayoumi use violence to control Firdaus, beating her until she submits to letting them rape her. Similarly, a policeman coerces Firdaus into having sex with him by threatening to throw her in jail. In all three instances, men use fear and threats to make Firdaus compliant with their abuse. Fear becomes such a constant presence in Firdaus's life that even when men don't

immediately threaten violence, she often lets them have their way with her—when a man picks her up on a cold night and initiates sex with her, she makes no attempts to resist or reciprocate, but rather passively accepts the encounter. This suggests that Firdaus’s fear conditions her behavior and makes her docile toward men’s advances and abuses.

Firdaus learns to endure her fear and survive abuse and assault by disassociating her mind from what happens to her body, suggesting that fear encourages women to withdraw from themselves, rather than be active participants in their own lives. Whenever Firdaus’s husband or Bayoumi rapes her, she does not fight back, but endures the assaults by becoming “like a piece of dead wood,” “emptied of all desire, or pleasure, or even pain, feeling nothing.” Because men regularly inflict violence or sexual assault on her body, Firdaus learns to mentally detach herself from it, demonstrating how one can mentally disassociate to survive pain and abuse as it happens. Disassociation also helps Firdaus deal with her fear. After she runs away from yet another exploitative situation, she observes, “I was no longer afraid. Nothing in the streets was capable of scaring me any longer [...] Had my body changed? [...] And where had my own, my real body, gone?” Although it protects her from fear, Firdaus’s disassociation also stops her from acting in the real world. She reflects, “I learnt to resist by being passive, to keep myself whole by offering nothing, to live by withdrawing into a world of my own.” Firdaus’s withdrawal protects her mind, but it also allows the men who hurt and abuse her to continue doing so unchecked. This implies that by withdrawing into herself, Firdaus loses her ability to respond to men’s advances or fight back.

When Firdaus kills an abuser—and thus acts against her fear—she realizes that she is an active person, able to fight and to speak the truth about the oppression of women. This transformation makes her a powerful threat to all men, suggesting that women who are not held down by their fears have the capability to fight back against oppressive men. Late in her life, Firdaus loses her independence when yet another pimp named Marzouk takes control of her. When Firdaus challenges him and tries to leave, she sees fear in his eyes: “I saw from the expression in his eyes that he feared me as only a master can fear his slave, as only a man can fear a woman.” Emboldened, when Marzouk strikes her, rather than disassociate, Firdaus actively strikes him back. Marzouk tries to pull his knife, but Firdaus takes it from him and stabs him to death. She acts, rather than withdraws. Firdaus is surprised at how easy it is to kill an abuser, and that she did not do it sooner. She reflects, “I realized that I had been afraid, and that fear had been with me all the time, until the fleeting moment when I read fear in his eyes.” When she kills Marzouk, Firdaus recognizes her own ability to retaliate against men. After the police arrest Firdaus for murder, she boldly tells them she simply killed a criminal: “I am saying that you are all criminals, all of you: the fathers, the

uncles, the husbands, the pimps,” suggesting that all men are culpable for oppressing women. To the police, Firdaus’s boldness makes her a “savage and dangerous woman,” to which she responds, “the truth is savage and dangerous.” The police arrest Firdaus and sentence her to death “not because [she] had killed a man [...] but because they are afraid to let [her] live.” Firdaus remarks, “I am speaking the truth now without any difficulty,” suggesting that now that she recognizes her own ability to act, she is free to criticize their sexist society as she sees it, making her a threat to all men in power, who maintain their power by keeping women fearful and repressed.

Firdaus’s transformation suggests that when women recognize their ability to act in spite of fear, they can tell the dangerous truth about male domination and call out their abusers. At the same time, Firdaus’s transformation also results in her own death, demonstrating that as powerful as it is for women to overcome their fear and resist oppressive societies, there’s also genuine risk involved in doing so.



RELIGIOUS HYPOCRISY

In Egypt, religion plays a prominent role both in society and in government. Firdaus, an Egyptian woman on death row for killing a pimp, grows up surrounded by religious men who, in spite of their moralistic pretenses, frequently exploit and abuse her. Although such figures should theoretically be a source of protection and safety for women, they prove to be as manipulative and oppressive as anyone else, concerned primarily with their own self-interests. Firdaus’s depiction of religious figures in her life makes the case that in Egypt, religion is not a source of virtue or moral fortitude, but merely a tool to uphold the ruling class’s power.

Many of the men in Firdaus’s early life are deeply religious, yet act in reprehensible ways toward women, suggesting that religious involvement does not confer any actual virtue, justice, or moral character. Firdaus’s father goes to mosque every Friday to pray, and talks at length with his friends about the imam’s sermon and about virtue, asking, “Was it not verily true that stealing was a sin, and killing was a sin, and defaming the honor of a woman was a sin, and injustice was a sin, and beating another human being was a sin...?” However, Firdaus recalls that her father spends the rest of the week beating his wife, stealing his neighbor’s crops, and selling sick animals as if they are healthy. Her father is clearly hypocritical, suggesting that his religious convictions don’t actually produce moral character. Firdaus’s uncle, a respected religious scholar, sexually abuses her as a child, which indicates that the religious leaders are as hypocritical as their followers. Moreover, when Firdaus’s husband Sheikh Mahmoud beats her until she is bruised and bloody, she runs to her uncle for protection, assuming that as a religious figure, he will protect her. However, Firdaus’s uncle claims that all men beat their wives, and his wife tells Firdaus

that “it was precisely men well versed in their religion who beat their wives. The precepts of religion permitted such punishment.” Rather than protecting women, Firdaus’s experience suggests that religious leaders encourage women’s oppression, seemingly justified by their religious “precepts.”

Firdaus observes that rather than serving God, religious leaders and rulers seem more interested in defending their own wealth and power, suggesting that religion is only a tool to protect the ruling class. Firdaus notes that men like her father believe “that love of the ruler and love of Allah [God] were one and indivisible,” which implies that organized religion is inherently nationalistic, wedded to the state and its power. When Firdaus is in secondary school, she often sees pictures in newspapers of “one or other of these rulers” praying at the mosque, surrounded by his entourage. The ruler always wears “an expression of great humility, like a man stricken to his depths,” but Firdaus knows that “he was trying to deceive Allah in the same way as he deceived his people” by solemnly praying and chanting. The rulers’ showmanship suggests that their religion is simply a façade, a tool to make them look noble and innocent. Such rulers and religious leaders often pray for “the souls of the nation’s martyrs” who died in war. However, watching them, Firdaus posits, “When they pronounced the word ‘patriotism’ I could tell [they] feared not Allah, and that at the back of their minds patriotism meant the poor should die to defend the land of the rich, their land, for I knew the poor had no land.” Firdaus’s statement pointedly argues that religion is not a way to serve God, but merely a system for the ruling class to enforce their rule and protect their **money** by manipulating those below them. Overall, Firdaus takes a cynical view of religion in Egypt, arguing that it is merely a façade that the ruling class uses to reinforce their own power and wealth—and that those who profess to be religious tend to be at least as immoral as anyone else.

individuals similarly, as people whom she loves that give life rather than take it. Contrarily, when Bayoumi starts to beat Firdaus, his once-kind eyes reveal themselves to be “jet black,” suggesting that they have no light and that he is not a source of compassion as Firdaus once believed. Similarly, Firdaus’s stepmother’s eyes are dull and unreflective, suggesting that although she is not cruel, she is unfeeling and does not bring life, hope, or love to Firdaus’s world.



MONEY

Money represents control, as it allows a person to have agency over their circumstances, their body, and their life. However, Firdaus ultimately comes to realize that money represents men’s control over women, as it allows them to buy access to women’s bodies and to keep women more easily controlled and socially dependent on them. Firdaus never has access to money—nor is she even allowed to be around it—for the first two decades of her life, since the people who want to control Firdaus understand that with money would facilitate her independence. The first time that a man pays Firdaus for sex and she holds money in her hand, she realizes that she can go anywhere, eat anything, and make her own choices in life—money allows her more control and agency than she’s ever had before. However, after Firdaus kills Marzouk, lets go of fear, and decides that she will act against men when they oppress her, the Arab prince still buys her by paying a massive amount of money. While they are having sex, Firdaus realizes that money ultimately belongs to men in a male-dominated world, and they use it to buy women’s bodies. Firdaus takes the 3,000 pounds that the prince pays her and tears it to pieces in front of him, feeling as though she is tearing apart every single man she has ever known in her life, each of whom used money to control her.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



EYES

In Firdaus’s narration, a person’s eyes reflect her perception of them and the way she judges their character. Although Firdaus barely remembers her mother, Firdaus does recall that her eyes looked like two rings of bright white surrounding two circles of deep black, and the white glows as if light flows through them from some magical place. The flowing light suggests that Firdaus remembers her mother as a life-giving source of comfort. This description is repeated almost verbatim for both Miss Iqbal and Ibrahim’s eyes (before Ibrahim betrays Firdaus), suggesting that Firdaus sees these



FINGERNAILS

The state of a man’s fingernails represents their social class and sophistication, which determines Firdaus’s perception of them as a whole and whether she wants to let them have sex with her. When Firdaus is raped by Bayoumi, exploited by the policeman, or preyed on by lower-class men, she detests their blackened, dirty fingernails, because men dig those dirty fingernails into her body during sex. Her disgust for their fingernails represents her disgust for them as a whole. On the contrary, the men that Sharifa brings Firdaus and the wealthy man who picks Firdaus up in the rain have clean, manicured fingernails. Although the sex is still exploitative, Firdaus does not feel the same sense of revulsion for the men themselves, and sometimes even tries to find pleasure in the act of sex with them. When Firdaus works independently as a prostitute, she rejects men with dirty fingernails and only sleeps with men with manicured

fingernails, which suggests that although it is still sex work, she has gained some sense of agency and lets her own tastes influence the business she does or does not conduct.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Zed Books edition of *Woman at Point Zero* published in 1975.

Part 1 Quotes

☝ It looked to me as though this woman who had killed a human being, and was shortly to be killed herself, was a much better person than I. Compared to her, I was nothing but a small insect crawling upon the land amidst millions of other insects.

Related Characters: Nawal El Saadawi (speaker), Firdaus

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

Nawal El Saadawi, an Egyptian psychologist studying women's neurosis, has come to Qanatir Prison to interview female inmates. When Firdaus, a woman on death row for murder, initially refuses to speak to Saadawi, Saadawi is crushed—she finds that she has staked enormous emotional weight on Firdaus's acceptance or rejection of her. In this short prelude to Firdaus's story, Saadawi establishes Firdaus as a hero, a paragon of humanity. This statement is particularly significant since Firdaus spends the majority of her life as the victim of abuse or as a prostitute, neither of which are typically portrayed as heroic roles. Additionally, the fact that Firdaus is about to be executed for murder, a crime which she admits to, again defies the typical concept of a hero. Saadawi's statement thus provides the first hint that all of the hardship in Firdaus's life is leading to an event or action that redeems her hard existence and makes her truly heroic.

By the end of the novel, the narrative shows that Firdaus killed a man, though only because he was violent toward her. Furthermore, Firdaus recognizes herself as the only woman who has overcome her fear of men and has the boldness to tell the truth of society's wicked oppression of women. This fulfills Saadawi's early impression of Firdaus's heroism, establishing her as a noble fighter, in spite of her incredibly difficult life.

Part 2 Quotes

☝ That love of the ruler and love of Allah were and one indivisible. Allah protect our ruler for many long years and may he remain a source of inspiration and strength to our country, the Arab Nation and all Mankind.

Related Characters: Firdaus's Father (speaker), Firdaus

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Firdaus sees her father discussing religion with his friends after they attend the mosque, and thinks that they are all interchangeable. Through her father, Firdaus expresses the nationalistic vein of religion in Egypt. That “love of the ruler and love of Allah” are considered to be the same thing suggests that to be a patriot in Egypt, one must also be deeply religious. At the same time, this implies an Egyptian who defies the ruler—say, if they considered the government to be unjust—risks not only their life but also their mortal soul. By previously pointing out religious hypocrisy and now demonstrating how Egypt's religious system is so wedded to state power, Firdaus's narrative suggests that religion has little to do with actually serving Allah (God). Rather, organized religion seems to be merely a tool for the ruling class to justify and enforce their own reign. Under such religion, if a revolutionary defies their government, they are not simply protesting corrupt men, they are protesting Allah himself.

☝ All I can remember are two rings of intense white surrounded by two circles of intense black. I only had to look into them for the white to become whiter and the black even blacker, as though sunlight was pouring into them from some magical source neither on earth, nor in the sky.

Related Characters: Firdaus (speaker), Bayoumi, Firdaus's Stepmother, Ibrahim, Miss Iqbal, Firdaus's Mother

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 21-22

Explanation and Analysis

Firdaus has little memory of her mother, but clearly

remembers the way her eyes felt—though no actual details about them. This description of Firdaus’s mother’s eyes is repeated almost verbatim when Firdaus recalls both Miss Iqbal and Ibrahim’s eyes. This early passage establishes eyes as a symbol throughout the book, as well as the motif of light flowing through them. Firdaus often dwells on eyes, which represent her perception of a person’s inner character. The image of sunlight pouring through her mother’s eyes suggests that she remembers her mother as someone who gave life, compassion, and support, which flowed out from her person like sunlight. This description then dictates all the other eyes Firdaus describes. When she remarks that her stepmother’s eye are dull and do not reflect the light, the lack of flowing sunlight suggests that although she does not oppress Firdaus, she also doesn’t give Firdaus any love or support. Likewise, when Bayoumi’s eyes turn jet black with no white at all, the contrast with this description of Firdaus’s mother’s eyes suggests that there was never any goodness in him at all.

“I knew that women did not become heads of state, but I felt that I was not like other women, nor like the girls around me who kept talking about love, or about men. For these were subjects I never mentioned. Somehow I was not interested in the things that occupied their minds, and what seemed of importance to them struck me as being trivial.”

Related Characters: Firdaus (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

While Firdaus is boarding at secondary school, her friends talk about boys while Firdaus dreams of leading and doing important work. The fact that Firdaus already knows she can never be a head of state as a woman suggests that societal sexism not only represses women, but causes them to lower their aspirations. More interesting, however, is the fact that Firdaus feels little interest toward men and would rather do something significant with her life. Although adolescent girls dreaming about boys and love is nothing new, in a sense it plays into society’s sexist hierarchy in which women are conditioned to orient their thoughts and lives around men. Since adult women are expected to become wives, “enslaved” to their husbands and intent only on pleasing him, teenage girls dreaming of love seems merely a preamble to that oppressed and contained life.

Firdaus’s early rejection of such a future for herself implies that she is not like other women and will not be so easily caged by male-dominated society. Her desire to lead and govern suggests that she values action over romance and accomplishment over good feelings.

“Firdaus has grown, your holiness, and must be married. It is risky for her to continue without a husband. She is a good girl, but the world is full of bastards.”

Related Characters: Firdaus’s Uncle’s Wife (speaker), Sheikh Mahmoud, Firdaus, Firdaus’s Uncle

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

After Firdaus graduates secondary school, Firdaus’s uncle’s wife wants to be rid of her, and comes up with a plan to marry Firdaus off. The argument that it’s dangerous for Firdaus to be without a husband suggests that marriage is not a choice for Egyptian women at this time, but rather a social obligation, which yet again demonstrates societal sexism by removing a woman’s right to choose for herself. Additionally, the world being full of “bastards” implies that women need men to protect them. Regardless of arguments about women protecting themselves, this belief establishes women’s total dependence on men in society. Men do not need women to protect or shelter them, yet society believes that women need men in this way. This perceived dependence creates an unequal power dynamic between men in women both in marriage and in society at large. Since only women are dependent on men, men can get away with mistreatment and abuse, because they know that women need them—a dynamic that is eventually evident in Firdaus’s marriage to Sheikh Mahmoud.

“All I know is that anything I would have to face in the world had become less frightening than the vision of those two eyes, which sent a cold shiver running through my spine whenever I remembered them.”

Related Characters: Firdaus (speaker), Sheikh Mahmoud

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: **Page Number:** 56**Explanation and Analysis**

When Firdaus learns that her uncle and his wife have arranged for her to marry an old man named Sheikh Mahmoud, Firdaus runs away into the city. However, as night falls in the streets, she senses two eyes in the darkness watching her, roving over her body. The feeling terrifies her so much that she returns to accept her forced marriage. As a woman in a sexually predatory culture, Firdaus does face danger in wandering the streets alone. Although she wants to be free, Firdaus's fear of being alone and vulnerable in the wide world pushes her to accept her oppressed and demeaned role in society. This suggests that men use fear to repress women and keep them subservient, forcing them to accept demeaning and awful positions they would otherwise reject for themselves. However, anything that could be done to Firdaus on the streets is arguably less horrific than her duration as Sheikh Mahmoud's wife, since her own husband entraps, rapes, and beats her. This ironically suggests, then, that despite Firdaus's fear, she may actually be safer defying society's expectations of her rather than bowing to them.

●● At night [Sheikh Mahmoud] would wind his legs and arms around me and let his old, gnarled hands travel all over my body, like the claws of a starving man who has been deprived of real food for many years wipe the bowl of food clean, and leave not a single crumb behind.

Related Characters: Firdaus (speaker), Sheikh Mahmoud**Page Number:** 57**Explanation and Analysis**

Firdaus describes sex with Sheikh Mahmoud, which she permits but does not invite or reciprocate. She likens Sheikh Mahmoud to a starving man scraping a bowl clean. This image is disturbing enough on its own, and is made even more unsettling by the fact that Firdaus is only 18 and her husband is over 60. The image of a Sheikh Mahmoud not leaving a "single crumb behind" suggests that his nightly assaults on Firdaus's body leaves her feeling empty, as if there is no part of her left to herself, untouched. His violation leaves her hollow. At the same time, Firdaus imagining her husband as a starving man and herself as a mere bowl of food suggests that on some level, Firdaus

dehumanizes herself just as Sheikh Mahmoud does. She seems to view herself merely as a body and a sexual object for Sheikh Mahmoud to "feed" from, not accounting for her own wants, desires, or feelings. This suggests that in both Firdaus and her husband's eyes, she is reduced to less than a human within the context of their marriage.

●● She replied that it was precisely men well versed in their religion who beat their wives. The precepts of religion permitted such punishment. A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience.

Related Characters: Firdaus (speaker), Sheikh Mahmoud, Firdaus's Uncle, Firdaus's Uncle's Wife**Related Themes:**   **Page Number:** 59**Explanation and Analysis**

After Sheikh Mahmoud badly beats Firdaus with a shoe, she runs to her uncle for protection, but finds that he is indifferent to her suffering and says that all men beat their wives. Firdaus assumes that religious men don't beat women but protect them, which suggests that Islam contains teachings about respecting human dignity. However, Firdaus's uncle's wife's statement that religious men use violence not only suggests that she internalizes society's low view of her, but that organized religion within their society is completely detached from ideas of human dignity. Her uncle's wife's claim that women must practice "perfect obedience" mirrors society's sexism in the way that it reduces woman's agency within the relationship will giving men all the leeway in the world. There is no mention of men practicing perfect obedience, even to women, which unjustly places the onus of whether a wife is beaten or not completely on her own shoulders. Although, by Firdaus's assumption, it seems that religion may once have been a source of protection for women, her uncle's utter indifference suggests that it has become yet another system that justifies men's complete control over women.

☝ It was though I was seeing the eyes that now confronted me for the first time. Two jet black surfaces that stared into my eyes, travelled with an infinitely slow movement over my face, and my neck, and then dropped downwards gradually over my breast, and my belly, to settle somewhere just below it, between my thighs.

Related Characters: Firdaus (speaker), Bayoumi

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

Although Bayoumi at first had kind-looking eyes, when he asserts control over Firdaus and is about to beat and rape her, Firdaus realizes that his eyes have changed and revealed his true nature. Firdaus often describes a person's eyes to reflect how she perceives their character. However, this is the first time that her description of someone's eyes has changed midway through knowing them. The image of Bayoumi's eyes as flat, "jet black surfaces" contrasts with her descriptions of kind people's eyes, which are ringed with bright white and seem as if light pours out of them, symbolizing their offer of goodness and compassion to Firdaus. Bayoumi's flat black eyes, by contrast, suggest that there is only evil inside of him and that he offers nothing whatsoever to Firdaus. This contrasts markedly with Bayoumi's conduct thus far, as he has fed and sheltered Firdaus for months. However, the change in his eyes suggests that his kindness was all a façade, a long con to take control of Firdaus and exploit her after winning her trust.

☝ I never used to leave the house. In fact, I never even left the bedroom. Day and night I lay on the bed, crucified, and every hour a man would come in.

Related Characters: Firdaus (speaker), Sharifa Salah El Dine

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

Although Firdaus initially enjoys her life working for Sharifa, she realizes that all the material comforts no longer satisfy,

and all she does is lie in bed and wait for men to have sex with her. Firdaus's use of the word "crucified" is unusual, evoking images of Christ's crucifixion from Christian tradition. According to tradition, Christ was crucified as a sacrifice to pay for humanity's sin. This forms a dark parallel to Firdaus's own position: she, too, offers her body as a sacrifice, not to God but to men. Given the crucifixion imagery, it seems that she views such a sacrifice as a punishment for her crime of being born a woman in an oppressively sexist society. Additionally, crucifixion is a form of torture, suggesting that even in Sharifa's luxurious house, Firdaus's life as a prostitute is torturous, as she is constantly offered to men she does not know or want.

☝ I realized this was the first time in my life I was eating without being watched by two eyes gazing into my plate to see how much food I took. Ever since I was born those two eyes had always been there, wide open, staring, unflinching, following every morsel of food on my plate.

Related Characters: Firdaus (speaker), Sheikh Mahmoud

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

The first time a man actually pays Firdaus for sex (rather than paying her pimp, who keeps the money for themselves), she feels empowered and goes to a restaurant and orders a large meal. Firdaus's sense of freedom from something as simple as buying whatever she likes and eating a meal without being monitored reiterates just how little agency she has had throughout her life. The "two eyes gazing into [her] plate," refer initially to Sheikh Mahmoud's eyes when he would watch Firdaus eat and shame her for not finishing her food. This embodies the authoritarian control men have exercised over Firdaus from her earliest days. The freedom she now feels comes explicitly from the fact that she has money, which suggests that as a woman, money leads to freedom and control. The freedom and sense of agency feels in this scene establishes money as a symbol for empowerment and control over one's own life, though eventually the symbol will shift to represent other people's control over Firdaus's life as well.

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

Related Characters: Firdaus (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

When Firdaus is 25 years old, she starts working as an independent prostitute and feels for the first time that her life and body belong to her. The ownership that Firdaus finally feels over her body and life are the direct result of having money, which lets her decide where she will live, what she will eat, when she will work, and even which men she will sleep with. This further establishes money as a representation of control, in this case to control her own circumstances in life. When Firdaus had no money, she was reliant on men and thus under their control. Now that she is able to make her own money, only she controls what she does and does not do, making her as free as she's ever been. Tragically, this money and control still only come at the expense of letting men have their way with her body, though it is many years before she grapples with this fact. Additionally, Firdaus's separate mentions of her "body" and her "self" nod to her pattern of disassociating to escape trauma, suggesting that she separates the two to protect her sense of self, even when her body is exploited.

●● 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.

Related Characters: Firdaus (speaker), Di'aa

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

When Di'aa tells Firdaus that she is "not respectable,"

Firdaus leaves her life of prostitution to try and become a "respectable" woman, even though this means making far less money. Firdaus's sudden sense of shame and desire to be free of roving eyes suggests that, even though she seems happy in her life as a prostitute, some part of her still resents the fact that she must offer herself to men, allow them access to her body. In spite of all the money and control over her life that prostitution offers, Firdaus's desire to be respectable confirms that she still desires more from life, to be utterly free from men and no longer subject to leering eyes, voices, or hands. That the only way for Firdaus to conceivably do so requires her to live on much less money suggests that sexist society makes little room for women who maintain control over themselves and do not submit to men's oppression.

●● After I had spent three years in the company, I realized that as a prostitute I had been looked upon with more respect, and been valued more highly than all the female employees, myself included.

Related Characters: Firdaus (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

Although Firdaus leaves prostitution to become a "respectable" woman, she discovers that the high-ranking officials in her company still expect women to have sex with them in exchange for favors, promotion, or protection. Although Firdaus tries to leave a world where she trades sex for money in taking a job at this company, her experience as a professional woman suggests that such transactional relationships are ubiquitous, expected of women in every profession. Although Firdaus was insulted and demeaned as a prostitute, her current reflection suggests that men similarly demean women when they trade promotions for sex. Although prostitution is frowned upon in Egypt, every relationship between men and women seems to be transactional, based on an exchange, and every relationship thus demeans women by reducing them to their sexuality, with which they are expected to barter.

●● As a prostitute I was not myself, my feelings did not arise from within me. Nothing could really hurt me and make me suffer then the way I was suffering now. Never had I felt so humiliated as I felt this time. Perhaps as a prostitute I had known so deep a humiliation that nothing really counted.

Related Characters: Firdaus (speaker), Ibrahim

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

When Ibrahim betrays Firdaus's love by suddenly marrying a different, wealthier woman, Firdaus feels a greater pain and humiliation than ever before in her life. Firdaus's claim suggests that, though disassociation removes her from acting and responding in the real world, it protects her emotionally. Although Firdaus has been violated and abused her entire life, her reflection that "nothing really counted" indicates that she expected and hoped for nothing else. Physical pain could be endured, since it is what she expected. By contrast, the powerful emotional pain that Firdaus feels from the only sexual relationship she did not disassociate from suggests that allowing one's self and body to exist together is a tremendous risk. Firdaus offered not only her body to Ibrahim but her heart as well, and expected something in return, exposing her to the possibility of disappointment and heartache. Such an experience tragically confirms Firdaus's beliefs that all relationships between men and women are transactional, and that the safest and freest she can be is in an entirely disassociated state, where her mind and body have little connection with each other.

●● A successful prostitute is 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.

Related Characters: Firdaus (speaker), Ibrahim

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

After Ibrahim betrays her, Firdaus leave her "respectable"

life behind her, seeing no point in trying to maintain the illusion of a world not dominated by transactional relationships. Although this is an intensely cynical view of men and women's relationships, Firdaus makes several notable points. The "deception" she refers to has multiple angles: there is the deception that women need to be dependent on men and cannot fend for themselves, which traps young women in bad marriages and convinces office workers to let their bosses have sex with them so they won't be fired. There is also the deception that anything like love exists, that a relationship between a man and a woman could be anything beyond a manipulative sexual transaction. Additionally, the point that men push women down and then punish them for being down suggests that pervasive sexism holds women back from achieving, which in turn reinforces sexist stereotypes of weak or unintelligent women, since none have been allowed to rise to their full potential. Although Firdaus's view of life and society is cynical, it is also a pointed and searing indictment of society at large and the status quo of oppressive sexism.

●● 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.

Related Characters: Firdaus (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

After leaving her "respectable" life to return to prostitution and wealth, Firdaus leans fully into the idea that all relationships between men and women are effectively transactional. Although Firdaus's viewpoint is cynical, living in a pervasively sexist society, she seems to have a point. If a wife is enslaved to her husband, who owns her outright, then as an independent prostitute Firdaus enjoys far more freedom. Although she still must allow men access to her body to make a living, she can choose the time and the place. However, that a prostitute's lot seems better than a wife's is less an advocacy for prostitution than it is a grim condemnation of society. A male-dominated society that makes all women effectively prostitutes can never value

women for anything more than their sexuality, and thus never sees them as full or complete human beings with personality and agency.

☞ One day, when I donated some money to a charitable association, the newspapers published pictures of me and sang my praises as the model of a citizen with a sense of civic responsibility. And from then on, whenever I needed a dose of honor and fame, I had only to draw some money from the bank.

Related Characters: Firdaus (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

As the final reflection on Firdaus's return to prostitution after she gives up on her "respectable" life, she muses that money even buys "honor." Firdaus's method of buying her respectable public image is grimly ironic. Although she tried to live honorably with a legal job, she found that there was no honor in it. Men respected her less than they did when she was a prostitute, which was theoretically the source of her shame. Firdaus's realization that she can simply buy respectability suggests that in her society, money controls everything, even the newspapers, the courts, and seemingly morality itself. This cynicism suggests that trying to lead a virtuous or respectable life at all is a waste of time and energy. From Firdaus's view, it is better to submit to society's brokenness and make money by any illicit means, and then simply buy one's self a good name in the public eye.

☞ Why was it that I had never stabbed a man before? I realized that I had been afraid, and that the fear had been with me all the time, until the fleeting moment when I read fear in [Marzouk's] eyes.

Related Characters: Firdaus (speaker), Marzouk

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

When Marzouk the pimp tries to stop Firdaus from leaving him, he threatens her, but she sees fear in his eyes. When he tries to attack her, she stabs him to death and realizes that killing a man is easier than she expected. Firdaus seeing fear in Marzouk's eyes suggests that she recognizes, in that moment, that his control over her is entirely dependent on her fearing him. However, the ease with which Firdaus finds she can stab a man to death suggests that much of her fear of Marzouk was unfounded—he is only a man, after all. She can end him with a knife, and goes on to do just that. Firdaus's transformation from a fearful, withdrawn woman into a killer suggests that her fear of men held her down for all of her life, even though she was perfectly capable of exacting the same vengeance on so many of her abusers and oppressors in the past. Marzouk loses control of Firdaus as soon as she no longer fears him, suggesting that men use fear to keep women suppressed and prevent them from recognizing their own potential to fight back against sexism and oppression.

☞ "I am not a prostitute. But right from my early days my father, my uncle, my husband, all of them, taught me to grow up as a prostitute."

Related Characters: Firdaus (speaker), Sheikh Mahmoud, Firdaus's Uncle, Firdaus's Father, The prince

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

After Firdaus angrily tears up the prince's 3,000 pounds that he pays her for sex, the prince remarks that Firdaus must be more than "only a prostitute," and Firdaus answers with this declaration. Both before this passage and after, Firdaus refers to herself frequently as a prostitute—she is obviously not denying the nature of her work. However, the prince's charge of Firdaus being "only a prostitute" carries a lowly and scornful connotation. Firdaus's charge that every man in her life raised her to be a prostitute thus suggests that, although she trades sex for money, living such a life was not her own choice, nor was it something she fell into because of her own personal failures or decisions. Rather, Firdaus argues here that in a world dominated by men,

where every woman is expected to barter with her sexuality and let men have their way with her, Firdaus could not possibly become anything other than a prostitute in one way or another. Egypt's sexist society conditions women to sell their bodies for money or security or favor, so it is thus hypocritical and absurd for men to look down on any woman who chooses to accept the situation and take money for her body instead.

●● In prison, they kept me in a room where the windows and doors were always shut. 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.

Related Characters: Firdaus (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

After the police arrest Firdaus on a murder charge and throw her in prison, she reflects that the police don't actually care about the man she killed—people are murdered all the time. Really, they are afraid of a woman who is willing to speak the truth. The policeman's fear of Firdaus, who is no longer fearful herself, again suggests that men instill fear in women in order to repress them and keep them from challenging sexist ideals. Firdaus obviously poses little physical threat to a unit of policeman, which suggests that it is her ideology that is dangerous. The danger in Firdaus merely pulling away the "mask" of the way their world operates suggests that truth is a powerful weapon against such oppression. When women like Firdaus overcome their fear and speak the truth about the abuse they endure, the corruption they see, and the absurdity of the way society treats women, such gendered oppression cannot stand. The fact that a pervasively sexist society relies on repression and cannot stand up to scrutiny is a damning condemnation in and of itself.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1

Nawal El Saadawi, an Egyptian psychiatrist, states that what follows is the true story of Firdaus, a woman Saadawi meets in Qanatir Prison. Saadawi is there to research neurosis in female inmates; Firdaus has been convicted of murder and is scheduled to be hanged in a few days. Saadawi asks to meet Firdaus. She understands that Firdaus is much different from the other women—she refused to sign an appeal for her life that the prison doctor made on her behalf. The doctor tries to convince Firdaus to speak to Saadawi, but she refuses. She won't speak to anyone

Saadawi is disappointed. When she returns the next day to try to see Firdaus again, the female warder acts protective of Firdaus, and charges that “they” sent Saadawi, though Saadawi doesn't know who “they” even are. She returns several days to try to see Firdaus, but each day the doctor or the warder tells her that Firdaus still refuses. In her rejection, Saadawi feels that Firdaus must be a great individual, and she feels small in comparison, like an “insignificant insect.” The rejection feels personal. She has trouble sleeping and feels like a failure. It reminds Saadawi of the feelings she felt when she loved a man who did not love her back. These feelings don't suit a researcher.

Saadawi gets in her car, prepared to leave the prison for good, when the warder runs up to her, shouting that Firdaus wants to see her. Saadawi feels “elated,” the way she did the first time she fell in love with a man. Saadawi's thoughts run quickly until the moment she looks into Firdaus's **eyes**. Her eyes are sharp, and Saadawi thinks, “I died the moment her eyes looked into mine.” Firdaus is steady, unmoving. She commands Saadawi to close the window blinds and sit on the floor. Saadawi does so. She thinks Firdaus's eyes and voice are like something out of a powerful dream. But Firdaus is real. She is here.

Saadawi's claim that Firdaus's story is true sets the novel within the bounds of creative nonfiction. While the story it is based on is true, Saadawi narrates from Firdaus's point of view and includes such detailed accounts of some experiences that they must be creative liberties used to flesh out the story and arguments. Firdaus's position as an inmate establishes her as a woman who exists in opposition to society.



The warder's accusation suggests that she believes in some element of conspiracy, that some collective, external force wants to destroy Firdaus. Saadawi's sense of anticipation and feelings of smallness suggest that she intuits that Firdaus will be one of the most significant people she ever meets in her life.



Eyes function symbolically throughout the novel to reflect a person's innermost character. However, Firdaus occasionally misreads people's eyes, suggesting that they represent her perception of that person's character more than their character in actuality. Firdaus's conduct toward Saadawi is immediately authoritative, suggesting that she is powerful and self-assured.



PART 2

Firdaus narrates: she states that she will speak uninterrupted, since the men are coming to execute her this very evening. By tomorrow, she'll be in whatever life comes after. She prides herself on going to this "place unknown." Firdaus has been searching her whole life for something to be proud of, something that would make her "superior" to men. Every man she has known only makes her want to strike them. Whenever Firdaus sees their pictures in the newspaper, she spits on them. She was a successful prostitute, though she did not know all men. But she knew many. She hid her fear of them behind expensive makeup. Her clothing and makeup are upper class. Her education is middle class. Her birth makes her lower class.

When Firdaus is growing up, her father is a poor farmer. He doesn't know how to read or write, only how to steal crops, beat his wife, sell his daughter for a dowry, or sell a dying animal as if it is healthy. Each Friday he goes to the mosque to pray, and afterward he walks with his friends discussing virtue and honor and "invoking Allah's name." Firdaus sees her father walking with his friends while she carries water, but they all look so similar to each other that she doesn't know which is her father.

When Firdaus has not yet reached puberty, her mother brings a woman who cuts off "a piece of flesh from between [Firdaus's] thighs." Firdaus cries all night. Her mother used to send her to the fields, where she and a young boy named Mohammadain eagerly sneak away to play "bride and bridegroom"—Firdaus lays down and Mohammadain reaches his hands up her dress until she feels a "sharp pleasure." But now her mother keeps her home to make bread. As Firdaus kneels, kneading dough between her knees, her gown rides up her legs. Her uncle, reading behind her, slowly reaches his hand up her thigh and under her gown, like Mohammadain. Her uncle goes further than Mohammadain, but Firdaus no longer feels the "sensation of pleasure," though she closes her **eyes** and tries to remember where it came from.

Firdaus's uncle visits during holidays from Cairo, where he attends the university, El Azhar. He teaches Firdaus how to read and write and he sings to her, and tells her about life in the city. Whenever he has to leave, Firdaus begs him to take her with him, but he tells her that El Azhar is only for men. When Firdaus walks sadly back to her father's house, she wonders who she truly is, if her parents are actually her parents, and if she is truly their daughter.

Before Firdaus even begins describing her earliest years, she summarizes the major themes of her life. Her desire to strike men suggests that she harbors a deep anger toward the entire sex. Firdaus's description of her life as prostitute suggests that sexuality will play a predominate role in her story. The suggestion that she appears upper-class despite her lower-class birth suggests that classism and money will also have significant impact on her life.



Firdaus's father's behavior displays both pervasive sexism and religious hypocrisy rampant in Egyptian society. While it might be tempting to see Firdaus's father and his bad behavior as an outlier, Firdaus's inability to distinguish between her father and other men suggests that he is an everyman, and such behavior is ubiquitous in their society.



Although never explicitly named, Firdaus experiences female circumcision, often described as genital mutilation by those who oppose the practice. Female circumcision typically involves removing a woman's clitoris, thus removing much of the pleasurable sensation from sex. This is widely condemned as a brutal and sexist practice, used to repress women's sexuality. Firdaus is circumcised before she even understands what it means, and she is given no say in the matter. This forced and permanent mutilation of her own developing body demonstrates that she has no agency in a society that heavily oppresses women.



Firdaus's relationship with her uncle is complicated, since he represents her only remotely positive relationship with an adult, yet sexually abuses and exploits her. Firdaus's need for adult affection seems to make her more compliant to her uncle's abuse, demonstrating how a sexist society that neglects and abuses female children can enable child abusers to groom young girls.



Firdaus thinks about her mother's **eyes**, about the first time she sees them. She feels as if those eyes always watch her as a child, always follow her. When Firdaus learns to walk, her mother's eyes hold her up, and Firdaus clings to them. As an adult, Firdaus cannot remember what her mother's eyes looked like—what shape they were, whether they had lashes or color. All she remembers is “two rings of intense white around two circles of intense black,” and they look as though “sunlight was pouring into them from some magical source.” Firdaus's mother tends to her father until her mother is “no longer there.” Firdaus has to “replace[]” her mother for a time until a new woman arrives, whose eyes are not her mother's. Her stepmother's eyes seem to dull the light, rather than pour light out.

Firdaus has many siblings, but they often die from disease or dysentery. When a son dies, her father beats her mother. When a daughter dies, he simply eats his dinner and goes to sleep. Her father never misses a meal and always eats, even when there is no food for his wife and children. Often, starving, Firdaus watches her father slowly eat and slap away any child's hand that reaches for his dinner. Firdaus feels that he is not her father. She is closer to her uncle. When Firdaus's father dies, her uncle puts her in elementary school. When her stepmother dies, Firdaus's uncle takes Firdaus with him to Cairo.

When Firdaus enters her uncle's house in Cairo, she feels reborn. She sees an electric light for the first time and screams. Her uncle gives her shoes and a dress to wear. Firdaus sees a mirror for the first time, and stares at her reflection with its large nose and thin lips. She despises what she sees—the features look like her parents—and decides that she hates that mirror.

However, Firdaus loves school and loves her uncle. When she comes home from school, she cleans his house, does his laundry, cooks dinner, and eats with him when he returns from El Azhar in the evenings. She sits next to him while he reads to her, and when she falls ill he sits with her all night, stroking her head on his lap while she drifts in and out of sleep.

Firdaus barely mentions her mother at all, suggesting that she has little memory of her, apparently because she died early in Firdaus's life. Firdaus's description of her mother's eyes focuses on the light pouring through them from somewhere else, suggesting that, although she does not really remember her mother, she views her as someone who brought life and goodness into her world. The description of her mother's eyes is one of several story elements that repeats multiple times with different characters. This circular form of storytelling emphasizes the way that history repeats, and how Firdaus experiences emotions and reactions that are common to other people.



Firdaus's father's indifference to any of his daughters dying suggests that the Egyptian society in which they live believes women and girls have little to no value. The fact that Firdaus's father eats while the rest of his family goes hungry suggests that families in this society are severely patriarchal—the needs and wishes of the father are essentially all that matters. Meanwhile, despite Firdaus's uncle's abuse—which is inexcusable, regardless—he is critical to Firdaus's education, again complicating the relationship between them.



Firdaus's move into Cairo with her uncle represents her entrance into the modern world, after being raised in a poor, undeveloped farming community. Ironically, Cairo's technological progression does not make it any more progressive in its treatment of women.



Once again, although her uncle does terrible things to her, her memories of him as a kind and protective figure depict him as a multidimensional person rather than a simple villain, which suggests that even men who display some good qualities are still capable of horrific things.



When Firdaus finishes primary school, her uncle takes her to the cinema. In the film, she sees a woman dancing with bare thighs and a man kiss another woman on the lips. Firdaus hides her face behind her hand. Her uncle tells her that such acts are sinful, but she cannot even bear to look into his **eyes**. When they get home, Firdaus hides beneath a blanket, trembling, waiting for her uncle to reach under the blanket, up her thighs, and press his lips on her mouth. Somewhere in her body, Firdaus feels a distant pleasure trying to awaken, but feels that it comes from outside her body, from a part of her that was “severed.”

Firdaus’s uncle eventually grows distant from her. He stays out late into the evening and stops reading to her. He dresses in a suit and tie, rather than a robe and turban. Firdaus begins secondary school and her uncle takes her to live with him and his new wife in a bigger house. Her uncle’s wife is fat and soft-spoken, but the softness seems to hide “cruelty.” Firdaus thinks her uncle does not love his wife, but fears her, since she comes from a higher social class. Her uncle brings a small servant girl to live in their home. She sleeps on the floor in Firdaus’s bed, but when Firdaus invites her to share the bed on a harshly cold night, her uncle’s wife sees it and beats them both.

Firdaus’s uncle seems to grow antagonistic toward her and sends her to live in the boarding portion of her school. Other children’s parents take them home on weekends, but Firdaus’s uncle never does. Even so, Firdaus loves school. She makes a close friend named Wafeya, and at night they lie together and share secrets and feelings. Firdaus only speaks about the future, because there is nothing for her to say about her past. She wants to become a head of state, though she knows that it’s impossible for women.

One night, Wafeya asks Firdaus if she’s ever been in love. Firdaus says that she lives her life without love, but Wafeya thinks that is hardly a life. As Firdaus falls asleep, she remembers Mohammadain and the sharp pleasure he made her feel, that’s now been cut away. She cries for the loss, as if it had only just been taken from her.

Firdaus’s shame at what she sees in the film elicits her fears of her uncle’s sexual abuse, while also stirring some element of sexual desire. This typifies a common element of Firdaus’s story, where her experiences of rape, sexual assault, and legitimate sexual experiences and desires all blur together. While this does not legitimize non-consensual sexual experiences, it does reflect a complicated reality of childhood sexual abuse, where an individual’s concepts of pain, pleasure, and violation can become blurred together.



Firdaus’s uncle’s relationship with his wife seems purely motivated by financial gain and devoid of any affection, attraction, or care. This suggests that one consequence of pervasive sexism is that relationships between men and women lose their potential for authentic connection. Those relationships instead become mere social contracts, where each person tries to get something from the other. The beating that Firdaus’s uncle’s wife gives Firdaus for sharing her bed with the servant suggests that she values class distinction more than compassion.



Firdaus’s dream of becoming head of state shows that she has high aspirations, with the intellect to match. However, her knowledge that she cannot become an elected leader as a woman suggests that societal sexism prevents women like her from reaching their true potential and offering their strengths and capabilities to the world.



Firdaus’s new sense of loss suggests that, beyond the act of mutilating a girl’s body, one of the great cruelties of female circumcision is that it takes sexual pleasure away from the individual long before she can understand what this feeling is. By the time a circumcised woman understands what has been done to her body, it is far too late.



To pass the time, Firdaus spends her free hours in the school's library and develops a love for books. She reads the histories of various Middle Eastern kingdoms and the succession of kings. Every one of them seems evil, obsessed with **money**, sex, and power. They hide their deeds during their lifetimes so that each makes the same errors, and history repeats itself over and over again. Firdaus reads newspapers as well, where she sees pictures of "rulers" feigning religious piety at the mosques, pretending that they don't use religion to simply protect their own interests.

When Firdaus tires of reading, she sits alone at night in the playground. One night, as she sits, crying, a teacher named Miss Iqbal finds her and sits with her, trying to console her. Firdaus looks into her **eyes** and sees white rings around black centers, as if light pours through them from some magical source. She holds Miss Iqbal's hands in her own, and the contact stirs a distant feeling of pleasure inside Firdaus, "like a part of my being which had been born with me when I was born, but had not grown with me when I had grown." Firdaus opens her lips to speak, but her voice fails her, so she holds on tightly to Miss Iqbal's hands.

Whenever Firdaus sees Miss Iqbal, she wants to speak, wants to reach out and touch her, but Miss Iqbal does not seem to notice Firdaus more than any other girl. Firdaus wonders if Miss Iqbal forgot their encounter in the playground. Wafeya notices that Firdaus speaks of her teacher often, and asks if she's in love with Miss Iqbal. Firdaus denies it, thinking it impossible to be in love with a woman.

Her final examination for school occurs not long after, and Firdaus ranks as the second student in her school and seventh in the entire country. During the assembly to recognize student achievement, the principal calls for Firdaus to come forward with her guardian. However, her guardian is not present and Firdaus feels paralyzed in her chair, unable to move. Miss Iqbal's **eyes** reach her through the darkness, and the teacher takes her by the hand and leads her to the stage. The contact stirs a pleasure that feels like pain in Firdaus's body. Miss Iqbal accepts the award with Firdaus and signs the necessary forms as if she were her parent, then leads Firdaus back to her seat.

Firdaus's conception that all the kings are evil and all the rulers are frauds foreshadows her eventual belief that all men are criminals. The ruler's feigning religious piety suggests that in Egyptian society, organized religion is not a way to serve Allah (God), but simply a tool to reinforce the ruling class's wealth and power. Firdaus's note that history repeats itself reflects the circular manner in which she tells her own story, where events repeat nearly verbatim, but with different characters.



The description of Miss Iqbal's eyes closely parallels that of Firdaus's mother's eyes, suggesting that Firdaus similarly sees Miss Iqbal as a source of life and motherly compassion. At the same time, Firdaus's stirring feeling of pleasure suggests that she has unrealized romantic feelings for Miss Iqbal. In a world where men oppress and prey upon Firdaus, it makes sense that she would be attracted to an adult woman who represents everything men are not.



Firdaus's denial of love for Miss Iqbal stems purely from the fact that Miss Iqbal is a woman, so it seems impossible. Although this is the only reference to homosexuality in the book, it suggests that Egypt's sexist and conservative society, which does not accept homosexuality, prevents Firdaus from even understanding her own feelings.



Firdaus's placement among the top students in the nation suggests that she has great potential as a scholar, leader, or professional, which only reinforces the awful effects of pervasive sexism since Egyptian women at this time are largely forbidden to pursue any of those things. Meanwhile, Firdaus's desire toward Miss Iqbal, a kind of a surrogate parent figure, may reflect Firdaus's lack of positive adult relationships throughout her childhood.



The school year ends, and all of the other girls' parents take them home. A staff member has to telegram Firdaus's uncle to come retrieve her. The night before he arrives, Firdaus sits alone in the dark, in a courtyard. She thinks she sees a shape moving in the darkness and hopes that it is Miss Iqbal, but when she calls out she realizes it is only a small brick wall that has always been there. When her uncle picks her up the next day, Firdaus frantically looks at every door and window, hoping they will open to reveal Miss Iqbal's face. None of them do. All she sees is the final closed door as she leaves the empty school.

When Firdaus returns to her uncle's house, she finds that he and his wife now have children of their own. The only place for her to sleep is on a couch in the dining room, against a thin wall through which she can hear her uncle and his wife—who refers to him as “your holiness”—speaking in their bedroom. Firdaus's uncle's wife wants to be rid of Firdaus, to send her to university. Her uncle insists that it would reflect on him poorly as a leader and religious man to have his niece studying alongside men.

Firdaus's uncle's wife decides that they should marry Firdaus to Sheikh Mahmoud, even though he is an old widower with a “deformity” on his face. Her uncle's wife speaks eagerly about what dowry they could get from Sheikh Mahmoud, and both she and Firdaus's uncle thank Allah for their good circumstances. They think Firdaus would be fortunate to marry such a man. She hears her uncle start to kiss his wife's body, and though she protests he forces himself on her, saying, “I'm your husband and you're my wife.” Firdaus feels the wall vibrate and she seems to vibrate with it. Her breathing grows rapid with a “strange frenzy.” After they finish, Firdaus's breathing returns to normal and she drifts to sleep, covered in sweat.

The next morning, after making breakfast for her uncle, Firdaus packs a backpack with her nightgown, secondary school degree, and merit certificate. She leaves her uncle's house and walks out into the street, unsure of where she will go. She feels as if the world is opening itself to her and she observes all the different people, separated by wealth and social class, thronging about the city. The rich men are fatter, and look as though they are always about to pounce. She feels a mixture of “wonderment” and fear that she is now a part of this mass of people. She feels like an infant newly exposed to the full breadth of the world.

The scene of Firdaus mistaking a brick wall for someone she longs for and the image of the closed door are repeated multiple times throughout the story, much like the description of her mother's eyes. This again suggests that events in Firdaus's life have a way of repeating themselves, and suggests that the characters involved in these parallel scenes occupy similar roles in Firdaus's life, at least for a time.



Firdaus's uncle's wife's use of “your holiness” suggests that religion encourages her to be deferential and submissive to her husband, rather than operate as equals within their relationship. Her uncle's refusal to send her to university because it would reflect poorly on him again demonstrates how pervasive sexism and religious norms can repress women and hold them back from reaching their potential.



The incentive of gaining a large dowry suggests that Firdaus's uncle and his wife are effectively selling Firdaus to an old man, demonstrating how sexist societal traditions can dehumanize women, treating them as property rather than as human beings with agency. Her uncle's insistence that sex, even without consent, is his marital right suggests that societal sexism also enables marital rape, teaching husbands that their right to their wife's body supersedes a woman's own right to decide what she does and does not want.



Firdaus's packed bag and merit certificate suggest that she is running away to strike out on her own, rather than be subjected to an arranged marriage to an old man. For Firdaus, this is an expression of her own agency and suggests that she wants to choose her path, rather than have one forced upon her. However, her feeling of being an infant in a dangerous world suggests that with agency comes risk and fear, since no one will be there to protect her.



As night falls, Firdaus has no place to sleep and her stomach aches with hunger. From the darkness, Firdaus senses two **eyes** watching her, waiting, roving up and down her body. Terror rises within her and she takes shelter in a well-lit shop until she feels the eyes have gone. She runs home to her uncle's house. She cannot recall what the eyes even look like, but whenever she walks in the street, she fears they'll return.

Once again, eyes represent Firdaus's perception of the person to whom they belong. Although Firdaus does not seem to see the man, her sense that the eyes rove up and down her body implies that they are evaluating her purely based on her sexuality, treating her like prey. This makes her return to her uncle and the arranged marriage, suggesting that fear of predatory men often leads women to accept oppressive situations.



Time passes, though Firdaus does not remember it, and she is married off to Sheikh Mahmoud. She is 18, but he is more than 60, and he has a swollen infection below his lower lip which dribbles bloody pus that smells like "dead dogs." Firdaus sleeps in a comfortable bed, but her husband always appears beside her. When his infection does not run, she lets him kiss her face. He rakes his hands over her body and wraps himself around her, like a starving man wiping his bowl clean, leaving "not a single crumb behind." Sheikh Mahmoud never eats much, but he hawkishly watches Firdaus eat. If she leaves any trace of food, he scolds her for "wastefulness."

Sheikh Mahmoud's infection is grotesquely described, reiterating the horror of the new life into which Firdaus has been forced. Although Firdaus does not call it such, her resistance to Mahmoud's advances suggests that he effectively rapes her. The image of his wiping the bowl, Firdaus, clean without leaving anything behind suggests that his assaults on her body leaves her feeling empty and used, with nothing left for herself.



Whenever Sheikh Mahmoud unwraps himself from Firdaus's body, she slips away to the bathroom and carefully scrubs every inch of herself multiple times, washing her husband off of her. Sheikh Mahmoud no longer works, nor has any friends or goes out to eat, because that would require spending **money** and he is miserly to the core. He spends all day closely watching Firdaus and shouts and beats her whenever he finds anything that could possibly be described as wastefulness, such as spilling a few grains of soap on the floor. Eventually, Sheikh Mahmoud beats Firdaus every day, regardless of her behavior.

Sheikh Mahmoud's whole life seems oriented around using and oppressing Firdaus, suggesting that dominating a woman constitutes his whole reason for existence. This seems to suggest that beyond merely mistreating women, in a pervasively sexist society, many men derive some sense of pleasure or power from controlling and hurting women. This makes such sexism seem nearly sociopathic.



When Sheikh Mahmoud beats Firdaus with a shoe, leaving her entire body badly bruised, she runs to her uncle's house for protection. However, her uncle tells her that all men beat their wives; it is common practice. When Firdaus protests that surely religious men like her uncle don't beat their wives, his wife tells Firdaus that it is *especially* religious men who do such things—their religion permits it, and their wives must practice "perfect obedience." When Firdaus's uncle brings her back to Mahmoud, Mahmoud does not acknowledge Firdaus or give her anything to eat for a night and a day.

Firdaus's uncle's indifference to Sheikh Mahmoud beating his niece suggests that their society's belief in the low value of women is so deeply entrenched that men do not even recognize their own female family members as worth protecting. Additionally, Firdaus's uncle's wife's statement that religious men are allowed to beat their wives by religious law again indicates that such religious men are deeply hypocritical, less interested in serving God or people than justifying their own power.



Firdaus grows so hungry that she takes some food for herself, and Sheikh Mahmoud shouts at her and berates her for leaving, insisting that he is the only person in the world who will “put up” with her and shelter her. He rapes Firdaus, and though his infection drips pus on her face and lips, Firdaus does not resist, but lets her body go limp like “a piece of dead wood.” Not long after, Mahmoud beats her with a stick so badly that blood runs out of her nose and ears. Firdaus flees, but rather than go to her uncle’s house she wanders the streets, face bleeding. Nobody takes notice of her as she wanders along the street, alone and empty-handed.

Firdaus sits outside a coffeehouse and asks for water. The waiter initially refuses, but seeing that she is injured, eventually relents. The owner of the coffee-house comes out and asks Firdaus why her face is battered and bruised. Firdaus tells him that she has nowhere to go, but wants to find a job with her school certificate. The man introduces himself as Bayoumi and says that she can live with him, in a spare room, until she gets back on her feet. Firdaus thinks that Bayoumi’s **eyes** seem kind and that his hands are “quiet,” “almost submissive.” On the way back to his flat, Bayoumi stops at a market and asks Firdaus if she prefers oranges or tangerines. She realizes that she’s never been asked her preference for anything before.

When they arrive at Bayoumi’s home, Bayoumi insists that Firdaus sleep in the bed and that he will sleep on the floor, which is the first time anyone has ever put Firdaus’s needs before their own. As Bayoumi guides her there with a hand on her arm, Firdaus feels the memory of an “obscure pleasure” vibrate in her body. She spends several months with him, cooking and keeping his house while he is working. He never strikes her or watches her plate to see if she wastes food.

However, after several months, Firdaus still desires to work and earn her own wage, to be independent, rather than stuck in Bayoumi’s house. When she tells him she is going out to look for a job, Bayoumi becomes enraged and slaps her in the face. His hands seem large and strong. His **eyes** are jet black, and Firdaus realizes she is truly seeing them for the first time as they wander from her face, down her chest, her torso, and settle on her groin. Firdaus puts her hands over her genitals but Bayoumi rips her hands away.

Sheikh Mahmoud’s insistence that no one else will give Firdaus shelter demonstrates how men can control women by weaponizing women’s social dependence on them, even if it is only perceived. Firdaus’s decision to go limp and simply endure the rape and violence indicates that she disassociates, separating her conscious mind from her physical body, as a way to endure horrific suffering.



Firdaus’s initial belief that Bayoumi’s eyes are kind suggests that she perceives him as a trustworthy and gentle individual. His generosity initially appears purely philanthropic. Firdaus’s surprise at being asked for her preference between something as insignificant as fruit reveals the level of control men have exerted over her for her entire life. Even for something as menial as food preference, Firdaus has been given so little agency thus far that it never occurred to her that she could choose for herself.



Bayoumi appears to be the first man in Firdaus’s life not to demand something of her or seek to exploit her. This briefly raises the possibility that non-transactional relationships can exist between men and women—a man may value Firdaus and respect her purely on the basis of her dignity as a human being.



Tragically, Bayoumi’s violence indicates that his kind demeanor was a façade—he has only been fooling Firdaus before taking what he wants from her. For Firdaus, this negates the possibility of a non-transactional relationship, since Bayoumi clearly wants to exploit her sexuality. The fact that Bayoumi does not exhibit this side of himself until Firdaus tries to break her dependence on him again suggests that women’s dependence gives men a sense of power and control.



Bayoumi starts locking Firdaus in the apartment each day and forcing her to sleep on the floor. When he comes home, late at night, he slaps her hard in the face and rapes her. Firdaus withdraws into her mind, leaving her body abandoned like “an empty sock” without desire or pain or pleasure—without any feeling at all. One night, Firdaus realizes the man on top of her is not Bayoumi, though the man tells her that he is the same as Bayoumi. The man asks Firdaus if she feels “pleasure.” She is afraid to say no, so she lies and tells him she does. The man calls her “slut, bitch” and bites her shoulder and breast. She hears the same words (and many others) from Bayoumi and his friends, night after night.

Eventually, a neighbor woman realizes that Firdaus is trapped when she sees her crying through the lattice in the door. The neighbor calls a carpenter who breaks the door down while Bayoumi is at work, and Firdaus flees into the street, which now seems to be the only safe place for her. After walking for hours, Firdaus finds a stone bench in the park where she goes to sit and rest. A woman sits beside her and asks her name. Firdaus looks at the woman and is startled by how powerfully green she is: green **eyes**, green eye shadow, green shawl, like the powerful green of trees growing along the Nile. The woman asks which man—“son of dog”—hurt Firdaus, and says that she knows them all, “they’re all the same.”

Firdaus tells the woman about her uncle and Bayoumi. The woman introduces herself as Sharifa Salah El Dine, speaking the name with an air of pride. Sharifa talks Firdaus back to her apartment, and Firdaus tells her all about her life. Sharifa’s apartment is lavish and she gives Firdaus soft clothes to wear. After a shower, Firdaus feels that she has been reborn as a soft and tender being. Sharifa watches her, and Firdaus puts her arms around her and “abandons” herself to Sharifa’s powerful green **eyes**. Sharifa tells Firdaus that to survive, one must be “harder than life,” and that though “my skin is soft, my heart is cruel, and my bite is deadly.” She tells Firdaus that life is a snake that bites the weak, and they each must also be deadly snakes in order to survive.

Firdaus’s ability to make her body “an empty sock” without feeling suggests that disassociation allows her to protect herself and endure suffering, but also causes her to dehumanize herself. She does not describe her body as something which belongs to her, which she has the right to govern, but merely as an object that men force their way into. The presence of men other than Bayoumi implies that he is operating as Firdaus’s pimp. The fact that a man asks Firdaus if she feels pleasure while effectively raping her suggests that he does not recognize the difference between legitimate, consensual sex and sexual assault.



Again, eyes prove to be symbolically significant in Firdaus’s recollection, signaling for the reader that, like Firdaus’s mother and Miss Iqbal, Sharifa may turn into a rare source of maternal comfort for Sharifa. Further, Sharifa’s green clothes and eyes evoke growing trees, which suggests that Sharifa may help Firdaus to personally grow.



Sharifa’s lavish apartment and clothing suggest that she is wealthy and that she has somehow risen above the pervasive sexism in Egyptian society. Meanwhile, Sharifa’s admonition that Firdaus must become hard and deadly foreshadows Firdaus’s eventual realization that she can wield power over men. Again, Sharifa seems to be a critical character for Firdaus’s personal development.



Sharifa helps Firdaus to understand the events of her past and re-envision herself in the present. Firdaus realizes that her own **eyes** are dark and alluring, her nose proud and sultry, her body slender and her thighs muscular. She realizes that she never truly hated her mother, loved her uncle, or knew Bayoumi and his friends. Sharifa teaches Firdaus to set her own worth—everyone has a price, and Sharifa’s is very high. Firdaus is educated and cultured, more even than Sharifa herself, and Sharifa tells Firdaus that her value is twice what Sharifa’s is. When Firdaus says that she cannot ask a man to give her **money**, Sharifa assures her that she will do it herself—Firdaus does not need to worry about asking.

Firdaus feels changed. Her world is “silvery” and silken. At night she has sex with men, but their **fingernails** are clean and manicured, unlike Bayoumi’s, whose black and dirty nails raked across her body. Firdaus holds such men’s hands between her breasts, then moves them down between her thighs. Though she feels something, it is more of a distant memory than an actual feeling, like “an organ that had ceased to be mine, on the body of a woman who was no longer me.” Firdaus asks Sharifa why she cannot feel pleasure during sex, but Sharifa tells her they should just work, not feel. Feeling leads to pain. Their pleasure is in the material comforts that **money** buys.

One day, Firdaus stops finding any pleasure in the soft clothes, perfumes, and view of the Nile from her balcony. She never leaves the house, but remains in bed day and night, “crucified,” while rich married men come to her. They dig their **fingernails** into Firdaus’s body, and when she lets out a muffled cry of pain they ignorantly ask if she feels pleasure. She starts to spit in their faces, but the men misread her pursed lips and bite them.

One man named Fawzy is not foolish, and asks if Firdaus feels pain rather than pleasure. She tells him she does. He asks if she wants to just sleep in his arms, and she does. Fawzy tells Firdaus that Sharifa is taking advantage of her, making **money** off her body and pain. He says that he’ll deal with Sharifa. Outside her bedroom, Firdaus hears Fawzy tell Sharifa he’s taking Firdaus away to marry her.

Sharifa protests and remarks that the last girl Fawzy took away fell on bad fortune. They argue, threaten violence against each other, and Firdaus hears Fawzy rape Sharifa, covering her protests with his hand. The sound of them creaking on the bed in the next room, the vibrations on the wall stirs Firdaus out of her daze—she realizes what Sharifa has turned her into. With Sharifa and Fawzy asleep in the next room, Firdaus puts on a dress and sneaks out of house.

Sharifa teaches Firdaus to recognize her own strengths and beauty and draw confidence from them. However, Sharifa still ties these things to one’s “price,” the fee that they will demand before letting a man have sex with them. This suggests that even for a seemingly empowered woman like Sharifa, society’s pervasive sexism still causes her to see all relationships between men and women as transactional. Although Sharifa sells herself for a high price, men still buy her, and she still trades her agency for money.



Fingernails appear repeatedly as a minor symbol to represent a man’s social class and demeanor. Since Firdaus decides to value herself highly, she only wants to have sex with men who are wealthy and sophisticated—who have clean fingernails. Sharifa’s statement that as women, their only pleasure should be in material comforts, reflects society’s attitudes toward women’s sexuality: they should not enjoy sex, but only offer it to men in exchange for wealth or security, such as in a marriage.



Firdaus’s loss of appreciation for material comforts indicates that she realizes there is little pleasure in such things when her body still does not belong to her. The image of her “crucified” evokes the crucifixion of Christ as a sacrifice for humanity’s sins. This suggests that Firdaus is herself a sacrifice to men for the “sin” of being born a woman in a man’s world.



Like Bayoumi, Fawzy briefly appears to be a decent man with Firdaus’s best interests in mind. However, his claim that he will take Firdaus away to marry her indicates that, like Sharifa, he only wants to exploit Firdaus’s body, rather than respect her personal agency by asking her what she wants to do with her own life.



Bayoumi, Sharifa, and Fawzy parallel each other in the way they gain Firdaus’s trust by pretending to care about her desires, before eventually exploiting her for their own gain. Nearly all of Firdaus’s relationships seem to be fundamentally transactional, with each party angling for their own personal benefit.



Firdaus walks through the pitch-black night alone, naked save for a dress so thin that it's nearly transparent. However, the night does not scare her; her body feels as if it belongs to someone else, with her own true body safely hidden away. A policeman grabs Firdaus by the arm. He asks Firdaus to come to his house, but Firdaus refuses. He says that he'll pay her, or else he'll throw her in prison for prostitution, since as a policeman he must "protect respectable families from the likes of you." Firdaus tries to shake him off, but he firmly leads her to his house and makes her lie in his bed. He takes his clothes off and Firdaus feels the familiar weight bear down on her body. The policeman digs his dirty black **fingernails** into her skin. When he finishes, he tells her he has no **money** tonight; he'll pay her next time.

Firdaus walks back into the night, but rain pours and turns the back roads into a stinking mud that smells like rot. She walks to a main paved road, shivering with cold. A car stops and a man gets out and asks her to come in out of the rain. In the cold rain, Firdaus's nipples show through her dress, and the man presses his arm against them as he helps her climb in the car. The man takes her to his house, helps her into the bathtub, washes her body with warm water and soap and then lays her in his bed. Firdaus feels his "weight press heavily down" on her, but his **fingernails** are clean and white, and his sweat does not smell bad.

Firdaus wakes in the morning in an "elegant bedroom" flooded with sunlight. When she realizes where she is and sees the man standing before her, she dresses quickly and moves to leave. As Firdaus walks past the man, he gives her 10 pounds. Firdaus feels a "veil" lift from her eyes. The **money** recalls the times she asked her father for money as a child, though he only gave her a coin, a piastre, once. The coin made Firdaus feel empowered to buy whatever she chose—a piece of candy. The 10-pound note feels empowering, too, and Firdaus takes it to a restaurant and orders an entire chicken. She chews slowly, thoughtfully, and notices that the waiter does not watch her plate, does not care whether she leaves food untouched. The **eyes** that have always watched her, since she was a child, are gone.

The policeman's sexual exploitation of Firdaus, who is obviously a woman in trouble, suggests that men in every profession and every level of society participate in exploiting and oppressing women, even those men whose professional role is to protect others. Even so, the policeman's claim that he must "protect respectable families" from women like Firdaus indicates that he, and society, are clearly hypocritical, spurning women in Firdaus's position while also taking advantage of their desperation. Additionally, the policeman's dirty black fingernails suggests that he is a man Firdaus would never willingly let near her.



Firdaus continuously moves from one exploitative situation to another, suggesting that men's abuse of her forms a rhythm in her life to which she tragically adapts. Although this man is helping Firdaus by bringing her out of the rain, he still expects sex for his service, again indicating that at least in this society, any interaction between men and women is inherently transactional, never altruistic. The man's clean fingernails suggest that he is a member of the sophisticated upper-class, demonstrating that men at all levels of society exploit women.



Firdaus finds money empowering. Money symbolizes control throughout the book, and ultimately men's ability to control, as it provides one of the main avenues through which men control women and demand access to their bodies. However, in this instance, the 10-pound note offers Firdaus a small amount of control—more agency than she has ever known in her life. Firdaus's new ability to eat what she chooses and when, or to leave it untouched, directly defies Sheikh Mahmoud's earlier treatment of her, and suggests that Firdaus feels free of men's controlling influence for the first time.



Firdaus watches the way her waiter furtively avoids looking straight at her 10-pound note, even when she gives it to him to pay for her meal. She realizes that her father, her uncle, Sheikh Mahmoud, and Sharifa all handled **money** with a nearly religious observance. All of these people (except Firdaus's uncle when she was young) kept money carefully concealed from Firdaus for her entire life, as though it were some "sacrilegious pleasure," a forbidden thing, available to everyone else but her. Firdaus almost asks her waiter who decided money should be so "forbidden," but instead hands him the 10-pound note.

From that day on, Firdaus walks with her head high. She looks every man directly in the **eye**. If he handles **money**, she does not avoid looking at it, but openly gazes at it. When men approach her, she looks them over and rejects them if their **finger nails** are dirty or she simply doesn't like them. If she accepts a man's offer, she demands double what he wants to pay her. At 25 years old, Firdaus feels for the first time that her life and body belong to her. She offers herself only for large sums of money, which men pay. She makes so much that she takes a beautiful apartment and even hires servants and cooks. Her bank account grows, and in her free time she reads, goes to the cinema, or discusses politics.

Among Firdaus's friends is a writer, a man named Di'aa. When Di'aa first comes to her house for sex, she leads him to the bedroom. He wants to spend time chatting instead, but Firdaus insists he'll have to pay for his time just the same. Di'aa thinks that the whole thing feels clinical, like a visit to the doctor, though "not respectable." Firdaus tries to cover her ears and block the words out, but they pierce her mind and echo, drowning everything else out. Even after Di'aa leaves, his words follow Firdaus, keep her from sleeping or eating or feeling at peace as she used to. Another "veil" is torn away from Firdaus's vision and she sees that, despite her **money**, she will never be a "respected woman" as a prostitute.

Firdaus decides to become a new person, to leave her old life behind no matter what it costs her. After much hunting, she manages to find a job with her secondary school certificate for an industrial company. She sits in a small office attached to the chairman's office and manages his schedule for him. With a much smaller income than before, Firdaus can only afford a small room with no toilet, so every morning she must take her towel to the communal bathroom, and then push her way into the bus to ride to work. In the building where she works, low-level employees like herself must walk past a guard, who checks them in whenever they enter or exit and keeps careful watch that each employee is wasting minutes.

The male waiter's deference to Firdaus occurs because she has the money to pay for a meal and his services, demonstrating how money can reverse gender roles and put Firdaus in a position of power over men. Her memories of others keeping money from her suggests that those people understood that if Firdaus had money of her own, she would no longer be dependent upon them or under their control.



Money symbolizes control in Firdaus's hands as well. Although money was used to control Firdaus, now that she has money of her own, it offers control over her own life. She is able to live as she chooses, be the master of her own home, and reject men for any reason whatsoever. Significantly, Firdaus's newfound freedom allows her to develop interests that have nothing to do with sex as well, like cinema and politics, which she has not been able to do since she was in boarding school.



Di'aa's accusation that Firdaus's trade is "not respectable" is hypocritical, since regardless of whether it's respectable or not, he himself pays for Firdaus's services. His complaint that the process feels clinical parallels the men who ask Firdaus if she feels pleasure, even while they sexually assault her—he mistakenly conflates a paid-for encounter with Firdaus as a legitimate, voluntary sexual experience, as if she was doing this for her own pleasure, and not just his. This suggests that men misunderstand both sexuality and the transactional nature of their relationships.



Although Firdaus is a free woman and makes her money through lawful means, the guard's careful observation of when each employee enters and leaves echoes the same level of control that men exerted over Firdaus in the past—especially Sheikh Mahmoud and his obsession with ensuring Firdaus did not waste anything. This suggests that, although Firdaus is now "respectable" since she is no longer a prostitute, men still maintain a high level of control over her daily life, making such sexism and oppression seem inescapable.



The higher officials enter and leave as they please, with no one to watch their use of time. They drive their own cars, rather than take the bus. One day, when Firdaus misses the bus, an official stops his car and offers her a ride, though Firdaus knows that this gesture carries the unspoken proposition for sex. She tells him that her body costs more than a ride or a promotion, and the official looks alarmed and speeds away. After three years, Firdaus realizes she was better respected as a prostitute than a low-level female official. Though Firdaus herself never does, her co-workers have sex with their superiors for fear of losing their jobs and with the slim hope that it will merit a promotion or favor.

Firdaus does not care about keeping such a job and will not let her superiors touch her. Ironically, this makes them see her as a virtuous and proud woman, and they start “vying with one another” for her respect and goodwill. Even so, Firdaus likes her job and office well enough. It is nicer than her own room, and she often stays at the office until late in the evening, or sits in the courtyard alone.

One night, while Firdaus sits alone in the dark, she sees a shape in the darkness. Ibrahim, one of the company’s employees, approaches. He sits next to Firdaus and asks why she sits alone. Firdaus thinks his **eyes** see straight into her. She inexplicably starts crying, and Ibrahim tries to console her but starts crying himself. Firdaus gazes into his eyes and sees two rings of white surrounding pure black circles, as if light flowed through them from some “mysterious source.” She takes his hand and feels the distant memory of a lost pleasure stir deep inside herself. She tries to speak, to recall the memory, but cannot.

Whenever Firdaus sees Ibrahim, she tries to speak but cannot. She listens to him speak at a revolutionary meeting demanding equal rights for lower-level employees, and she applauds wholeheartedly. During work, she finds herself writing his name on her desk, and her friend Fatheya asks her what happened in her life. Firdaus cannot pinpoint the rekindled sense of pleasure, the distant memory of it from her childhood. She thinks back upon the night with Ibrahim, staring into his **eyes**. In Firdaus’s mind, images of Fatheya, Wafeya, Miss Iqbal, and Ibrahim overlap and blur into each other until she cannot distinguish between them.

The higher officials exhibit the same freedom and agency normally afforded to men, a level of independence that Firdaus was only able to enjoy as an independent prostitute. The offered exchange of sex for favors or promotions suggests that even outside of prostitution, relationships between men and women are still transactional. Firdaus’s observation that she had more respect as a prostitute suggests that since men are still bartering with women for sex, they still devalue and dehumanize them.



Firdaus’s raised standing for rejecting every man’s advances parallels the way she raises her price as a prostitute whenever she rejects a customer. This suggests that other women, by submitting to the men’s world and trading sex for promotions, ultimately devalue themselves in other people’s eyes.



Ibrahim’s eyes appear to Firdaus like those of Miss Iqbal and Firdaus’s mother, suggesting that Firdaus perceives him as someone who will bring positivity to her life, someone to trust. Her description of Ibrahim’s eyes and reaction to touching his hands parallels her interaction with Miss Iqbal almost verbatim, suggesting that she falls in love with Ibrahim in much the way she fell for Miss Iqbal, and regards him as a similarly safe and compassionate person.



Firdaus’s memory of a long-lost pleasure, once available to her but no longer, refers to her clitoris that was taken from her via circumcision as a child. That Firdaus still feels the memory of sexual pleasure from her early childhood experiences with Mohammadain, and the absence of that pleasure in her life now, demonstrates how such a mutilation, a violation of Firdaus’s body and autonomy, has affected her for the rest of her life. This reiterates how oppressive and cruel the practice is.



Ibrahim becomes chairman of a revolutionary committee and Firdaus devotes all her spare time to working for the committee's aims. One evening after work, Firdaus misses the bus, but Ibrahim sees her and picks her up in his car. They admit to each other that neither has stopped thinking of the other since they first met. They tell each other everything about their lives, even the things that Firdaus tried to keep hidden from the world and herself. They do this for two more days, baring their souls to each other. The third day, they go to Ibrahim's house and sleep together, "a warm embrace." The world glows brighter for Firdaus, but one of her colleagues tells her that she is a fool—there is no such thing as love and Ibrahim's virtue is just an illusion.

One day, Firdaus sees Ibrahim across the courtyard. A crowd of people gather around him, and his **eyes** seem different to her, "estranged." Ibrahim does not see Firdaus, but someone in the crowd announces that Ibrahim has just gotten engaged to the company chairman's daughter, which the person says is a great career move for Ibrahim and will ensure that he rises through the ranks. The news crushes Firdaus, and she walks alone into the rain, wandering the streets and sobbing until night falls. She returns to the courtyard and thinks she sees something moving in the darkness, perhaps Ibrahim, but she realizes it is only a brick wall. She leaves through the company gate, turning one last time to check the windows and the doors, to see if one will open to Ibrahim's face. The door remains closed.

Ibrahim's betrayal causes Firdaus more pain than she's ever known in her entire life. As a prostitute, she protected her innermost self and only offered her body for **money**. As a lover, she laid herself bare, let down all of her defenses and received nothing in return, leaving her more humiliated and ashamed than she's ever been. She'd wanted to "be saved through love from it all," but was only betrayed. She considers that her virtue, like the virtue of any poor person, is less an "asset" than a despicable mark of "stupidity" that allows others to prey upon them. Firdaus decides to give up all hope of virtue, since "a successful prostitute was better than a misled saint." She thinks that marriage, where women sell permanent access to their bodies, is "built on the most cruel suffering for women."

Ibrahim offers Firdaus a ride in his car after she misses the bus, which parallels the company executive's offer, which she knew was a proposition for sex. Meanwhile, Firdaus's sexual encounters with Ibrahim constitute the only time in the story she has sex willingly, for her own pleasure (other than her childhood experiences with Mohammadain). Significantly, it is also the only time in her life that she recognizes being in love.



Ibrahim's engagement to the company chairman's daughter suggests that he has not only turned his back on Firdaus, but also on the revolutionary spirit that drew Firdaus to him, since he blatantly embraces nepotism to advance his career. This suggests that everything about Ibrahim was fraudulent, including his principles and claims of love for Firdaus. This represents a pivotal moment in the development of Firdaus's belief that all relationships are transactional, since even her noble lover turns out to be just one more man using her for sex.



Firdaus's beliefs—that virtue is the same as stupidity, that marriage is the cruelest prison, that love is a lie men tell to convince women to have sex with them—are undeniably cynical, without hope for a better world to exist. However, given her experiences, they seem justified. Firdaus's inability to find any man who is not blatantly misogynistic and predatory suggests that living in a society shaped by pervasive sexism conditions men to be naturally exploitative and oppressive toward women.



Firdaus walks the streets at midnight, a prostitute once again. With no ties and subject to no man, marriage, or love, she feels absolutely free. Firdaus does not hope or desire, so she cannot be disappointed. If one man rejects her, she can simply take the next one who turns up. A wealthy man picks Firdaus up. As she lies in his bed, she reflects that men like Ibrahim use their cleverness and virtue to get “what other men buy with **money**.” She sees Ibrahim several times, years later. On the last time he convinces Firdaus to let him come home with her. After they have sex, Ibrahim starts to leave without paying Firdaus, until she demands it. She realizes that he was never in love with her, “but came to me every night only because he did not have to pay.”

Firdaus realizes that she’s hated men for years, though managed to keep that fact hidden from herself until now. Most of all, she hates the men who try to “save” her from being a prostitute, who use her low position to try to make themselves feel noble. Firdaus decides that “a woman’s life is always miserable. A prostitute, however, is a little better off.” She convinces herself that this is the life she chose.

Firdaus often turns men down, which drives her price even higher. She realizes that men cannot stand being rejected, because their ego tells them it is a rejection of their innermost self. This is especially true for politicians, who cannot stand to be rejected in front of others. One ruler sends his officers to Firdaus over and over, and she always rejects him. They offer **money**, threaten her with prison, and even try to convince her that having sex with a great politician would fulfill her nationalistic duty. Another ruler has Firdaus arrested when she refuses him, but she hires an expensive lawyer to persuade the court that she is an “honorable woman.” Money buys honor, but Firdaus can only make it by “losing [her] honor.”

Firdaus finds no honor in what she does, but she reasons that men control the world, so all women are effectively prostitutes. She is at least free, while a wife is “enslaved.” Firdaus realizes that just like servants or housekeepers, she can buy honor with **money**. She donates large sums to charities and the local papers publish her picture and praise her as a model citizen.

Firdaus’s decision to live without desire or hope represents a full shift into her disassociation, allowing her to survive by feeling nothing at all. By being completely detached, she has nothing to lose, and thus is immune to pain and fear. Firdaus’s reflection that men like Ibrahim use their tenderness and principles to get sex, rather than paying for it, suggests that all relationships between men and women are simple transactions, devoid of any real love or concern for each other.



The men who try to save Firdaus from prostitution cynically use her position as a “not respectable” woman to elevate their own sense of themselves. Despite any noble pretenses they have, this suggests that they, too, exploit Firdaus for their own benefit, even if there is no sex involved, making their relationships to her just as transactional.



Adding to Firdaus’s cynical but realistic view of society, her observations here suggest that ego drives the majority of men’s actions, even when they are in positions of power. Rather than serve the people they govern, the men’s authority serves only their egos. Likewise, Firdaus’s realization that enough money can make a court judge her to be an “honorable woman” suggests that money represents control to such a degree that it can shape morality, law, and how one is perceived in society.



Firdaus’s description of married life as slavery suggests that, in a world where every relationship is transactional, a prostitute has the advantage of seeing the value of the transaction plainly and clearly. This allows Firdaus to make better decisions about what she will and will not sell her body for.



Eventually, a pimp named Marzouk approaches Firdaus and tells her he must work for her now, for her own “protection,” though he is the only one to threaten her. Firdaus tries to use her **money** and connections to get the police to protect her, but she discovers that Marzouk is better connected than she is. When Firdaus finally relents to Marzouk, he rapes her. As he bears down on her, she withdraws into herself and makes her body a “passive, lifeless thing” and remains unmoved, feeling neither pleasure or pain.

Marzouk starts taking the majority of Firdaus’s earnings, and she learns that he is a powerful pimp connected with the police, with doctors, with people in the courts. Firdaus realizes she is no longer free, that her body is merely a “machine” that makes a profit for men. She decides that she will leave, so she packs a bag and heads for the door. Marzouk bars the door with his arm. He says the world is made up of “masters” and “slaves,” and Firdaus as a woman can only be a “slave.” Firdaus glares at him unblinking, filled with hate. For a brief moment, she sees real fear in Marzouk’s **eyes**.

Marzouk overcomes his fear, raises his arm, and slaps Firdaus in the face. Firdaus raises her own arm and strikes him even harder. Marzouk tries to pull his knife from his pocket, but Firdaus takes it from him first and stabs him in the neck, then the chest, then the belly, and then in “every part of his body.” The knife moves in and out of Marzouk easily, and Firdaus wonders why she never killed any men before now. She realizes that fear had been weighing her down for her whole life, stopping her, until the moment she realized that Marzouk feared her too.

Firdaus leaves the house, walking with her held high like a “goddess.” Her fear is gone, and without its weight she feels “light as a feather.” She walks past policemen in the dead of night, but feels no fear since she carries herself like a powerful upper-class woman. A man in an extravagant car asks her to come with him. She states that her price is too high, but he tells her he is an Arab prince and offers her 1,000 pounds. Firdaus knows he is telling the truth, but tells him that she is a princess and demands 3,000 pounds. In the prince’s bed, Firdaus withdraws into herself. As the prince bears down on Firdaus, he keeps asking if she feels “pleasure,” and each time she confirms he grins like a “happy fool.”

Marzouk’s ability to take control of Firdaus demonstrates how, in a male-dominated society, even money cannot protect her from every man. This suggests that, even as a prostitute, Firdaus’s potential is limited by her gender. Society’s pervasive sexism reaches so deeply that it seems Firdaus can never achieve full control over her life.



Marzouk’s description of women as inevitable “slaves” suggests that although Firdaus had money and agency as an independent prostitute, these things were still reliant on her offering her body to men. The fear that Firdaus sees in Marzouk’s eyes hints that men recognize the threat of an independent woman, and that their control over women is tenuous rather than permanent.



Firdaus’s killing of Marzouk is her most significant expression of her own agency and willpower against a man, since she not only resists him mentally by disassociating, but physically by answering violence with violence. Firdaus’s new lack of fear suggests that her own fear of men was based on her perception of their inherent power and dominance, which Marzouk’s fear eliminated.



Firdaus’s new fearlessness is different than before. While she formerly dealt with fear by mentally retreating out of her body so nothing could affect her mind, now she carries herself as a woman who knows that she is powerful in both mind and body. The act of killing a man, an oppressor, demonstrates her own power to act and overcome against men, against gendered oppression. However, Firdaus’s momentary disassociation under the prince suggests that part of her still believes money will solve her problems and offer her control over herself.



Suddenly, Firdaus shouts, “No!” When the prince hands her 3,000 pounds, she takes the **money** and furiously shreds it in front of him. As she tears the money, she tears the final veil off of her **eyes**, and feels that she is ripping apart all the money she ever received from men, ripping every single man she ever knew to pieces: father, uncle, Marzouk, Bayoumi, Di’aa, and Ibrahim. The prince is shocked, and exclaims that Firdaus must truly be a princess; he’d thought she was only a prostitute. Firdaus tells him that she is not a prostitute, though from the beginning every man in her life raised her to be one.

The prince says that Firdaus’s father must be a king. Firdaus says that he wasn’t a king, though not so different from one. However, she learned to kill on her own. The prince does not believe that she could kill—he thinks her too “gentle.” To prove him wrong, Firdaus raises her hand and strikes him hard on the head. She tells him that stabbing a knife through his neck would be just as easy, and he would deserve it for spending his hungry people’s money on prostitutes. He is no more than an “insect.” The prince screams “like a woman in trouble” and calls the police to arrest Firdaus as a “killer.” When the police arrive and call Firdaus a criminal, she declares that no woman can be a criminal, but that every single man is one. She states that she is only speaking a “savage and dangerous” truth.

The police handcuff Firdaus and take her to prison. Someone tells her that she can make an appeal for her life, but she states that if they let her out, she’ll only kill again. Firdaus knows men fear her because she no longer fears them. When she struck out in violence, she ended her fear and learned that such an action is easier than she imagined. Although she was a “successful prostitute,” Firdaus admits that every man she ever met made her want to strike them in the head. Firdaus does not fear death, but men fear her newfound power to tell the truth, because the truth is “simple” and “savage,” more fearsome than her knife. Armed with the truth, she no longer fears “the brutality of rulers and policemen.”

Firdaus ripping the money symbolizes her rejection of the control men exert over her with their money. Although that money gives her more agency than she previously knew, the fact remains that her freedom comes at the cost of letting men have access to her body. Firdaus’s statement that every man she ever knew raised her to be a prostitute reflects how a society with such entrenched sexism teaches woman that their sexuality is their main asset, something to be traded and bartered over with men.



Firdaus and the prince swap traditional gender roles—Firdaus wields power through violence, while the prince screams “like a woman in trouble.” The power that Firdaus exhibits here to act and speak truthfully about corrupt society is arguably the potential power that caused Marzouk’s eyes to flash with fear, the same power that the police now seem to fear as well. Firdaus’s claim that the truth is “savage and dangerous” suggests that pervasive sexism and gendered oppression can only exist as long as the reality of men’s horrific treatment of women goes unchallenged and unacknowledged.



Firdaus’s claim that she’ll keep killing men seems, from her perspective, the only path toward justice since she believes all men are criminals who are complicit in oppressing women. The fact that the police and powerful men fear Firdaus’s ability to speak the truth to the point that they’ll execute her suggests that men often keep women repressed and silent out of insecurity. A woman who is no longer burdened by fear is thus the greatest threat to men’s dominance and ability to subjugate women.



PART 3

Saadawi narrates: Firdaus finishes speaking and silence fills the room. The story and Firdaus's powerful voice overwhelm Saadawi. Police come in, surround Firdaus, and take her away. Saadawi never sees her again, but Firdaus's voice remains in her head, spreading truth and fear. As Saadawi gets in her car and drives away, she perceives the world as full of fear and hypocrisy and predatory behavior. She feels small and insignificant, ashamed of her own fears. Saadawi slams her foot on the accelerator, racing to obliterate the world, but then slams her foot on the brake and screeches to a stop. Saadawi concludes, "At that moment, I realized that Firdaus had more courage than I."

Saadawi's brief slam on the accelerator in her car suggests that Firdaus's reckless fight against oppression and corruption has invigorate Saadawi. However, her slamming the brake suggests that she is not yet ready to follow through and accept the possibly lethal consequences of challenging men's power. This suggests that Saadawi, unlike Firdaus, is still held down by her fears. Saadawi's book thus ends on a dark note, without any particular sense of hope. However, it vividly and powerfully reflects the plight of Egyptian women in the 1970s and their desperate need for feminist revolution.





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