

E4 IB – Part I Summer Reading: *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi

Part 1: Please read the author’s foreword before beginning the novel. Read twice, first for comprehension then again for **annotations**.

Part II: As you read, annotate the following **motifs** to help you develop your **individual oral** and supervised writing:

1. Eyes – **blue ink or pencil**; each reference should be highlighted and annotated.
2. Money and power – **green ink or pencil**
3. Food – **orange ink or pencil**
4. The body – body parts; consider descriptions of it as *vehicle*, as *machine* **purple ink/pencil**
5. Voice(s) – **pink ink/pencil – record in black**
6. Pleasure and pain - **brown**
7. Value and worth – **Highlight in yellow but record the annotation in black**
8. Freedom and entrapment – **underline in red and annotate in same**

You will have a reading comprehension test on the second rotation prior and a peer check of annotations. Mini-presentations on the **various literary strategies El Saadawi implements which are based on the above annotations and the journal responses below** follow.

Part III: Journal Entries

- Write a minimum of 350 words in each response to the prompts and/or questions below. You only have to respond to FOUR.
 - Each response must include textual evidence using MLA format. These quotations should be “snippets;” you are text blending not quoting long passages. Use only parts of the passages that are germane to your position. You must follow formal mechanics rules. Example: write in 3rd person, present tense, use proper punctuation for all quotations. Also you must be keenly aware of YOUR writing style for each entry: vary sentence beginnings, vary sentence lengths, use elevated register, etc.
 - All entries HAND WRITTEN into a composition book.
1. What is the purpose of the first and third chapters? Is the perception of Firdaus different without that frame narrative? Is there any reason to suspect that Firdaus’s story has been shaped or embellished by the frame narrator?
 2. What are the common denominators of all the recurring scenes with the “eyes” (e.g. her mother, her first escape, Miss Iqbal, Ibrahim)? What thematic effect is achieved?
 3. Discuss how the men in the book exert their control over Firdaus and how Firdaus gradually changes her response as she learns from them.
 4. Compare how certain repeated passages change their significance as the story progresses. What changes in Firdaus’s perspective are indicated?
 5. What do the characters in the book fear? Is there something that everybody fears, or do the fears hinge on wealth, social standing, and gender? Explain and support with text.

6. What does the existence of the prostitute/good wife, whore/virgin dichotomy say about the status and condition of women in this society? How does Firdaus see both sides of this dichotomy as one and the same?
7. Firdaus learns that money is very powerful, yet in the final pages of the inner frame story, she tears up 3000 pounds. Why does she do this? What larger lessons are implied?
8. In the third chapter, the return to the outer frame, Firdaus claims that she “...want[s] nothing, hope[s] for nothing, fear[s] nothing...” Is that freedom? What is a free woman in this text? What is a free prostitute? Support your assertions with evidence from the text.
9. Discuss the significance of the setting, Qanatir Prison. Within this setting does Firdaus’s decision to speak to the doctor strengthen or weaken her character? Does it raise her above “point zero”?
10. In the novel, it is possible for a man to become part of the upper class even if he is not born into it. How is this achieved? Are the same options available to women? In the novel discuss what choices women have. Why is it that Firdaus never considers herself a member of the upper class despite her upper class dress and make-up?

Part IV. After you have finished reading and annotating the novel, locate four excerpts that address one of these cultural/global issues.

1. **Culture, identity, community:** consider how both Firdaus’ and her uncle’s identity changes when they move to Cairo. Pay attention to how Firdaus is mutilated AFTER she questions her paternity.
2. **Beliefs, values and education:** because IB asks you to consider tensions that arise when there are conflicts of beliefs, values and ethics, you may want to consider why the uncle has Firdaus educated but refuses to send her to university out of religious considerations. **Do** research Islam as it is practiced in Egypt. Historically, Egypt was NOT especially conservative religiously until the 1980’s. Why?
3. **Politics, power and justice:** Consider what women are allowed and not allowed to do. The inner frame story’s final pages meld politics to Firdaus’ prostitution. You should also research why an **Arab prince** comes to Cairo for fun and games. What was happening politically in the 1970s that encouraged this kind of behavior?
4. **Art, creativity and the imagination:** research Islam’s perspective on the arts. Analyze the effect of Firdaus’ story on the outer frame narrator. El Saadawi’s novels are widely banned in the Middle East. What does that suggest about art and a woman’s voice?
5. **Science, technology, and the environment:** El Saadawi trained as a psychiatrist. Note in the outer frame narrative that initially the fictional psychiatrist approaches Firdaus as a “case” that will add to her medical knowledge. What might El Saadawi be saying about science and technology? You might find interesting comparisons to the next novel: *Handmaid’s Tale*.