

# **A Journey to Prison of Two Young Women, Lemona and Firdaus**

RAISA SIMOLA

*University of Joensuu, Finland*

In prisons, there are short-term and long-term prisoners, guilty and innocent people. Common to all of them is, however, that they have come to prison. Prisons generally have a shortage of material goods and shortage of positive external stimuli. But one thing is not lacking there: time. And time is the thing that prisoners in different ways try to shorten. For example, they start making journeys of the mind, mental journeys. What are the events and factors that caused my journey to prison?

The roots of European prison literature go back a long way. In Africa, prison literature is much younger; this is not only because written literature there is quite recent but also because the prison institution has been spread in Africa by the white colonialists. Last century has been the ‘golden age’ of prison literature: “the twentieth century has produced as many prisoners and prison writers as in the entire previous history of man” (Davies 1990: 7). The prison writing of political prisoners has been viewed as the greatest menace to society: “One written word in the political cell is a more serious matter than having a pistol. Writing is more serious than killing.” (Saadawi 1991: 73.)

In this paper I deal with two works of prison fiction. The first, *Lemona’s Tale* (1996), was written by the Nigerian Ken Saro-Wiwa (1944–1995) and the other, *A Woman at the Point Zero* (first published 1975) by the Egyptian Nawal el-Saadawi (1931–). Both writers have also written their own prison memoirs, documentary works (Saro-Wiwa: *A Month and a Day. A Detention Diary*, 1995; Saadawi: *Memoirs from the Women’s Prison*, 1986). Thus, in this respect, they are similar. However, one comes from Nigeria and the other from Egypt, one is a man, the other a woman. When we read their fiction texts next to and overlapping each other, what is the image that results?

## LEMONA’S TALE

*Lemona’s Tale* is a monologue by a 52-year-old woman in the Port Harcourt prison a day before her execution. Lemona’s story consists not only of immediate actions, which make the prison journey, but it becomes a reduced autobiography. Or in other words: no less than an (auto)biography is needed for telling why Lemona came into the prison.

Lemona starts telling her story from the very beginning, from her birth: she was the only child of a poor single mother. Due to a lack of money Lemona has had to leave the school and give up her “first dream”, her plan to become a nurse. Lemona’s tale is not only a story of coming into prison but of giving up the dreams as well. Lemona’s dominant features include a kind of passivity, a defenceless attitude, becoming an object of events. The earliest incident originates from her school times. Someone had broken Lemona’s water pot, and when the culprit remained silent, the teacher decided that Lemona was to blame and he gave her six strokes.

I held myself and refused to cry although I was hurting badly. And all that day at school, I refused to say a word to anyone. I would not answer questions in class, and there was not a tear in my eye. – The story eventually got to my mother, and she questioned me as to what had happened. I refused to answer her questions and maintained a stolid silence thereafter. (13)

The next incident of keeping silent happens when Mrs. Mana becomes furious after having learnt about the relationship between her husband and Lemona. “Deep down inside me, I hurt, and hurt badly too. But you would not have guessed it from my face. I did not utter a word throughout her tirade.” (30) Mrs. Mana pours all her rage on the underage Lemona while the primary culprit, Mr. Mana, quietly disappears into his room. Without a word, Lemona leaves her workplace. It is also illuminating that people usually pick up Lemona like a thing; the Scottish John Smith even literally picks her up in the street. Lemona herself even seems to realize her object-like nature:

Funny the way people came into my life and disappeared, as if they were meant to lead me some of the way on my life’s journey and do no more than *hand me over* to the next person in a sort of relay race. (54; emphasis added.)

The culmination in Lemona’s life happens, however, when she understands having killed her beloved John Smith: her desire for life disappears and she wishes to be sentenced to death. Indeed her wish becomes true for she is convicted for murder of a white man. However, not even at this point does Lemona manage to become the subject of her life: because of being raped in prison she becomes pregnant, and according to the law a pregnant woman cannot be executed. After having the baby Lemona achieves a fixed point of life through motherhood; but the baby is taken away from her. When Lemona is released after 25 years – in honour of Nigeria’s 20th year of independence – others again outline the script of her life. Lemona has only one obsession: to see her daughter, and so she is willing to be taken to the father of her child, who proves to be the judge Kole Bamidele. Unaware of the bitter relationship between Kole Bamidele and his wife (who also is a judge) and the traps of the previous Commissioner of Prisons, Lemona is soon again in court, this time accused of the “psychopathic” murder of

Kole Bamidele and his wife. In fact the judge-wife had in her raging hatred killed her judge-husband and tried to kill Lemona as well, but as she defended herself, the roles changed and the attacker became the victim. In the end of her story Lemona is compared with a piece of floating seaweed and thinks that all people are alike. Is there anyone who really controls or influences events?

How should we read Lemona's meandering story? We may approach the question with a new question: Why does Lemona tell her story? Lemona justifies it by hoping that it "may help other women find their way through life and help them to avoid the errors I made" (8). It is difficult for the reader, however, to know what Lemona means by her life's 'errors'. The claim presupposes at least some 'change' if not 'development'. But even if Lemona's solitude during her long stay in the prison grows, she essentially does not change. When after twenty-five years she briefly gains her freedom and watches the birds and butterflies she recalls how half of her life was wasted in gaol, and she yearns for freedom in images from her sweet past:

I was reminded of those days when I, well dressed, the cynosure of all eyes, flitted from party to party, from nightclubs to bars and restaurants. And it reinforced my sense of loss and added to the feeling of 'aloneness' which bore down heavily upon me. I dared not repeat the experience. (124)

At the end of her story, when comparing herself with the floating seaweed and thinking that perhaps no one governs her /his life Lemona denies the subjectivity of herself and others, that is, denies her guilt, the prerequisite of regret. It is illuminating that immediately after this Lemona states: "If I have any regret at all, it's only that I did not get to see that child of my womb" (132).

In Lemona's tale, we also have to take into consideration that the story is factually not only Lemona's but her daughter's, too: Ola writes down the story told by her mother. She even states: "The tone of voice may be hers and it may be mine; it does not matter." (8) Here are the guidelines for the reader: the content, the 'message', seems to be more important than the textual 'surface'.

In Lemona Saro-Wiwa describes a girl coming from the countryside to the town, who first is condemned to the poverty of those who have to accept any work given them. Industriousness does not lift Lemona from the pit of the poverty. Beauty on the other hand – another attribute attached to her – brings economic comfort to her. After having lived as a prostitute and a kept woman, Lemona comes close to 'getting' the status of a housewife leading a luxurious life. During the 'height' of her life Lemona represents one of those economically-maintained unsocial and unpolitical urban women: "...and there was noise of independence, Nigerian independence, in the air. None of that interested me. It had nothing to do with me or my friends. We never discussed it" (85). At the threshold of Nigerian independence one could hardly express her unpolitical and unsocial attitude more clearly. Although this is the most explicit of Lemona's utterances concerning her world view, other parts of the text back the claim implicitly. For example, when

Lemona decides to become civilized while living with John Smith, she takes her roommate as her teacher: civilization consists, according to her, of the books recommended by the white colonialist John Smith.

Lemona's first sentence is pronounced in the late 1950s, at the end of Nigerian colonialism, and the judge passing sentence is a representative of white colonial power. According to the black attorney and a black judge (Ola's father) the severity of the sentence was based on racism: the murder of a white person was a more aggravated deed than that of a black man – a claim that seems to be a truth in the text. This is also the most critical statement in the text against colonialism and racism. The knife, the only thing that is left for Lemona by her mother represents a symbolic denial of colonial exploitation: it is this (yam)knife, implying the traditional world and its values, which kills the white colonialist John Smith. These scenes however, though central to Lemona's course of life, are quite unrelated and occasional comments on colonialism. The other social theme of the book – the difficult position of women in patriarchal Nigerian society – is chiefly considered in the long and meandering monologue of Mama Bombay, which can be crystallized in this way: a woman is a toy in the hands of the fate (see 40–41).

*Lemona's Tale* is written through traditional patriarchal and even sexist eyes. It is indicated by the concept of woman of the work as well as by the way the text gives meaning to the biological side of the life. In his letter to Ola, her father tries to explain his fatherhood as a 'political act' – he impregnated Lemona since it was the only way of saving her from the harshness of the colonial sentence (138). The explanation given by Chief Albert Chuku in contrast notes that the childless judge fell for Lemona and wanted a child from her (120). However, the undisputed fact remains that the judge raped Lemona several times. Whether the former or the latter explanation is correct, both explanations defend the rape. The rapist is made the opponent of racism or a man who follows his 'natural' desire for becoming a father; later a loving father, the victim of his ogress-like wife, and a generous man who wants to transform Lemona and her daughter into members of a respectable family. The rape in the text is not as such 'bad' because with it 'good' is achieved. It is worth noting that rape for Lemona is no problem, on the contrary: after having realized her pregnancy she is just delighted at her motherhood, the "fulfilment of the woman's role". On the other hand, childlessness, the lack of fulfilment of the woman's role, makes the wife of the abovementioned judge and 'good' rapist, ogress-like. Even the basic pattern of the book – the relationship of the narrator and the listener – emphasizes biology. Lemona has kept silent in gaol for many years because the only person to whom she wanted to tell her story was her daughter. It is thus most probable that Lemona tells her story to the pseudonym "Patricia" since she has the feeling that this is her daughter. The text hints at even more, to Lemona's intuitive biological knowledge. She asks: "May I call you my daughter?"

Like a protoromantic heroine Lemona at first is poor and homeless but through her beauty escapes economic embarrassment. Lemona is dazzlingly

beautiful, and this is the trait the book does not stop repeating: in general all the people, irrespective of their sex, wonder at her extraordinary appearance. The Commissioner of Prisons in fact notes that it is Lemona's beauty that makes her death sentence so sad. (1) Lemona experiences one big love affair which causes her turmoil. 'Fate' always has its fingers at the culmination points of her life. Lemona's education is scarce, but she manages to get an educated lover; her lover is not only an engineer but also "the storyteller, the painter, the man who knew everything about the flowers" (86). He also is "the possessor of a heart of gold" – that is, until he becomes a traitor. Lemona's rapist and Ola's father is no commoner, but a Justice of the Supreme Court of Nigeria, and "one of the best in the country" (7). After being imprisoned Lemona retires into herself and proudly keeps silent for 27 years. The explanation the work offers is a romantically biological one: Lemona has kept silent in prison all the years since the only person to whom she wanted to tell her story was her daughter. The text even implies to her biological intuition. Further, with no relatives or community members backing her, Lemona is an exceptionally lonely African. She is condemned partly on the wrong grounds. All in all, she is an exceptional human being and an "enigma" to everyone. Ultimately Lemona's story is a romantic tragedy of individualistic character.

## FIRDAUS' TALE

*A Woman at the Point Zero* by Nawal el Saadawi is structured like *Lemona's Tale*. In both tales, the central character is a woman convicted of murder (several murders) who tells her life story to another woman a little before her execution. Except for the frame stories, the books consist of ceaseless first-person monologues. In both stories, the protagonist is described through her pride as being 'different' from the other prisoners and totally free from the fear of death. The official representative of the prison in both works is on the side of the condemned. In Nawal el Saadawi's book she states the crux of the book: "A murderer or not, she is an innocent woman who does not deserve to be hanged. It is them that should be hanged" (15). Both narrators tell their life stories beginning from childhood. Their roots are in the lowest social class and they later outwardly climb to the upper class, or in Firdaus' words: "From the upper class I only had my make-up, hairstyle and expensive shoes" (24). Both earn their living as prostitutes. Both Lemona and Firdaus have kept silent and not told their life story until the eleventh hour, and neither has previously known the woman to whom they open themselves. Lemona tells her story to a woman whom she senses to be her daughter; Firdaus tells her story to a woman whom she senses to be a well-known Egyptian feminist writer and psychiatrist.

The frame narrator of *A Woman at the Point Zero* is Nawal el Saadawi, and Firdaus has her counterpart in reality as well. Saadawi started listening to the story of the 'real' Firdaus in August 1974, and at the end of that year this 'real' Firdaus

was hanged. In the preface of the book Saadawi states: “When she started to disclose her life and I got to know more and more about her, I began liking her even more strongly; I began admiring this woman who seemed to be so different from all the women I knew. Thus I before long started to plan writing a book about her. In this way this book, *A Woman at the Point Zero*, came into being.” (9) The exceptional character of Firdaus is emphasised by Saadawi who as a psychiatrist has met countless women.

Georges Tarabishi, who comes from the same Arabic culture as Saadawi, has written a scholarly book on Saadawi’s works (or part of her works), *Woman Against Her Sex. A Critique of Nawal el-Saadawi* (1988). Tarabishi reads Saadawi’s texts through Freud’s theories; thus, he believes in both Freud’s theories and their power in explaining, for example, the story of Firdaus. The same book contains Saadawi’s reply to the author. While I agree with Saadawi in describing Firdaus’ story as “simple, uncomplicated and unambiguous” (Saadawi 1988: 201), Tarabishi’s writing is surprising. At the same time that Tarabishi spasmodically seizes upon theory, he is insensitive to even the central ideas of the book. However, although the central ideas of *A Woman at the Point Zero* are simple, one cannot characterize the book as simplistic.

The summary of Firdaus’ experiences reads: “All those men whom I came to know, every one of them has awoken in me only one desire: the desire to raise my hand and hit him straight in his face.” (24) Firdaus then starts to ‘prove’ her claim: all the men she tells of have directed physical or mental violence – often both – towards her. During the reading process, it is worth remembering that in Firdaus’ story things become reduced and possible subplots are cut because they are seen clearly from the end of the story: from the truth of the end. Tarabishi, irritated by the negative male image of the book, has ignored the inner logic of the work.

Both Lemona and Firdaus are smart school children but their education remains unfinished. Lemona does not even finish primary school since she has to go to the city as a household servant. After her mother’s death Firdaus goes with her uncle to Cairo and in due time completes secondary school as the second best student. Lemona dreams about becoming a nurse, which has been most popular occupation among Nigerian girls at least in fiction. Firdaus is more ambitious in her occupational dreams: she dreams about the professions of physician, engineer, attorney or judge, which were all in practice occupied by men rather than women. Firdaus does not only dream but is politically active as well: she participates in a march against the government. She reads books and learns ‘something new’ from each of them. She learns that the rulers are men, and that “they all yearned after endless money and sex and limitless power” (42). The story of Firdaus would have been different had she been allowed to attend the university. But at 18 she was compelled to marry a repulsive man who was over 60 years of age.

In *Lemona’s Tale*, religion is not given much space or meaning. Firdaus’ story is just the opposite: in it religion is tightly connected with patriarchy and use of power. In the newspapers there are pictures which present rulers attending their Friday morning prayers. Firdaus sees through the “very humble expression” on his

face that the ruler had “tried to deceive Allah in the same way as he deceived human people”. The word “nationalism” in the prayers ultimately meant that “the poor ought at the risk of their life to defend the land belonging to the rich ones, the land of these rulers” (43). Firdaus knows that the poor do not own land. In her documentary work on Arab women, *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1982), Saadawi states that religion “is most often used in our day as an instrument in the hands of economic and political forces” (3). Religion is not, however, the stooge of the rulers alone but of the heads of the patriarchal families as well. In her father’s house Firdaus learns the double standard: while the father regularly practises his religion and repeats the abstract phrases about the sin of ‘violating a woman’s honour’, ‘injustice’ and ‘beating somebody’ (25), he at the same time despises female children and is free to beat his wife. When the Firdaus’ guardians decide to marry her off they think only of the money they will get as a dowry and thank Allah for it: “If he [the future husband] agrees to pay hundred pounds Allah has been favourable to us.” (55) *A Woman at the Point Zero* illustrates the view Saadawi presented in *The Hidden Face of Eve*, that it is not possible to understand religion if it is looked at only as separate lessons, principles and guidelines; instead, one has to consider them “in their interconnections with specific situations, each of which is characterized by its own social, economic and cultural setting.” (Saadawi 1982: 65)

The focus of the interest of Tarabishi, who studies Saadawi’s texts, is in the prostitution practiced by the protagonist. The horrified scholar states that “far from accepting the man-woman relationship as entirely natural, she sees it as the most hostile and belligerent relationship of all” (Tarabishi 1988: 17). According to Tarabishi, Firdaus also practices prostitution “wilfully” (Ibid. 15) and ultimately aims at castrating men. In the next excerpt, where he makes a difference between Firdaus and a (‘common’) prostitute, he summarizes his thoughts as follows:

To the prostitute, frigidity is secondary; to Firdaus, by contrast, it is a primary condition. The prostitute becomes frigid in order to practice her profession; Firdaus, on the other hand, has chosen to be a prostitute in order to practice frigidity, because, to use Karl Abraham’s terminology, it is ‘castrating’. (Ibid. 23)

The only pleasure Firdaus has is “that of stripping men of pride in their masculinity” (Ibid. 24). The killing of the pimp, the climactic scene of the narrative – the incident that leads Firdaus into prison and death – is in Tarabishi’s view again a conscious choice by Firdaus. Firdaus clearly has a neurotic bent, Tarabishi states and continues that “neurosis can be defined as the lost ability to adjust to reality, whether positively or negatively”. “Can we then imagine a more neurotic condition than that of a woman who chooses to be a prostitute and murderess in order to wage a war of the sexes--” (Ibid. 33). All in all, “if women have any mission at all, it is to win the war by annulling it and not by arming themselves in their turn with thorns and a gun.” The women must “tame and humanize the penis”; and they must also “humanize the world” (Ibid. 11).

It is easy for me to agree with the basic points of Saadawi's Reply to Tarabishi. First, Saadawi notes that Firdaus does not kill "wilfully" but in self-defence: it is the pimp who first takes the knife and seeks to use it on Firdaus. Furthermore, Firdaus has not chosen to become a prostitute, on the contrary, "Throughout the novel Firdaus fights against becoming a prostitute." (Saadawi 1988: 201). Tarabishi's castration idea has to be a very dear one to him since he ignores this utterance of Firdaus: "I offered to men only the outer surface in order to protect myself and my inner self against them." (*A Woman...* 112) On the one hand, Firdaus aims at protecting herself against the harsh reality, on the other, she tries to "humanize men's penises, attempting to change them from a destructive weapon into a human organ capable of love and the exchange of human emotions" (Saadawi 1988: 194). In spite of her attempts, she does not manage, and that is what the story focuses on. All in all: where Saadawi sees social, political, economic and religious problems, Tarabishi only sees a woman's biological problems.

Tarabishi sees these heroines through purely Freudian eyes – a view which cannot possibly humanize women. The problem is not that Firdaus has failed to humanize the world but that Tarabishi has failed to humanize Firdaus. Firdaus prefers to die on the gallows rather than live as a sex object or a commodity. Tarabishi maintains that women have no need to fight. Instead they should win the war by annulling it. This is an elegant turn of phrase, but he has omitted to tell us how women can possibly annul a war when they still have no political, military or social power, whether collectively or individually. Without this power, how can a woman stop the war or annul it? (Saadawi 1988: 199)

Saadawi defines prostitution as sexual intercourse between a man and a woman aimed at satisfying the man's sexual and the woman's economic needs (Saadawi 1982: 56) and continues that, "if we are once more to speak of honour, whom can we consider less 'honourable', a woman who hires out her body to a man for money with which to buy food, or a state that has bartered logic, reason and morals so that a handful of people with power and capital can continue to earn millions every year?" (Ibid. 86)

Firdaus is one of a family of many children who in her childhood already comes to see the little value female children have. She cries her worries alone, 'trying to repress her tears' and holding her feelings in secrecy. Some basic angst, a memory from the past tries later out to escape but does not find its way: "My lips opened to speak but there was no voice, and it was as if I had forgotten everything at once I remembered it." (*A Woman...* 46) She tries to express her anxiety when she is close to Iqbal and Ibrahim, who for a while are more important to her than anyone else, but can never form of words. In her mind the reader can see the relationship between Firdaus' anxiety and the circumcision she experienced as a child, the loss of her mother, the violence of her father, the sexual harassment of her uncle. Saadawi's description of her own circumcision

(Saadawi 1982: 7–8) is in its negativeness equivalent of that of Firdaus (*A Woman...* 26). In her work *The Hidden Face of Eve* Saadawi often talks about an incestuous relationship in which a young girl is sexually harassed by some male relative. “Most people think that such incidents are rare or unusual. The truth of the matter is that they are frequent, but remain hidden, stored up in the secret recesses of the female child’s self, since she dare not tell anyone of what has happened to her; neither will the man ever think of admitting what he has done” (Saadawi 1982: 14). The tragedy is even bigger since the rapist or harasser is a man who in fact should protect the young girl. In Saadawi’s words we could state that the anxiety of Firdaus which never takes the form of words, has been “stored up in the secret recesses of the female child’s self”. Anxiety is ‘the instructions of life’ Firdaus gets from her childhood home.

While *A Woman at the Point Zero* is a story about the negative experiences which continue to pile up upon the protagonist, and how she comes to her life’s “zero point”, it also is consciousness story: Firdaus’ understanding of her society is at the end of her life very different from her understanding as a child. Tarabishi wonders why Saadawi (in the frame story) admires Firdaus (Tarabishi 1988: 33). The answer is, I think, that in Firdaus Saadawi sees one of those exceptional women who oppose their subordination; most women do not even realize their state (see Mustanoja 1992: V). Firdaus learns that men who maintained prostitution were the same who did not respect the prostitutes. The place of an ‘honourable’ woman was in marriage, which was a prison of its own:

This confinement of women to the home permits the attainment of three inter-related aims: 1) It ensures the loyalty of the woman and prevents her from mixing with strange men; 2) It permits her to devote herself entirely to the care of her home, husband and children and the aged members of the family; and 3) It protects men from the dangers inherent in women and their powers of seduction, which are so potent that when faced by them ‘men lose two-thirds of their reason and become incapable of thinking about Allah, science and knowledge.’ (Saadawi 1982: 143–4.)

All Firdaus’ customers were married and highly-educated men. (F 78.)

By denying the possibility of being reprieved Firdaus denies the society which did not permit her to have her human dignity.

## SUMMARY

*Lemona’s Tale* continues both the tradition of Nigerian urban fiction, initiated by Cyprian Ekwensi’s *People of the City* (1954), and the tradition of prostitute fiction, as exemplified in the early ‘cassic’ of the genre, Cyprian Ekwensi’s *Jagua Nana* (1961). Both Saro-Wiwa’s and Ekwensi’s works are abundant of events and both of them are written as if in a hurry (which makes the reading process more demanding). But when Lemona is an object of her life and a pushover of the

'fate', Jagua wants at least to measure her strength with the 'fate' and is a cat-like creature who in the end always lands on her feet. When Jagua has been described as a person 'who has masculine strength of character' (Little 1980: 81), one could not imagine that the same attribute would be used with reference to Lemona. Thus, even when compared with Jagua Nana – who also is created by a male writer – the apolitical and passive character of Lemona is conspicuous. In the end Lemona's journey to prison becomes an individualistic tale of romantic tragic nature, seen through patriarchal – and even sexist – eyes.

Lemona's tale may also be related to *The Palmwine Drinkard* (published originally 1952) by the Nigerian Amos Tutuola, the book that must have been familiar to Saro-Wiwa. One of the central stories in the work is a story about a "complete gentleman". This is a cautious tale for young girls in which they are warned not to fall for beautiful men from strange regions, because then their fate would be unhappy. Lemona has been told not to go with a white man but she does not care about the warnings – and gets her lesson like the girl of Tutuola's story who follows the "complete gentleman". If read in this way, *Lemona's Tale*, which in any case is rather a romantic than social critical work, can be seen as a modern morality tale.

While Saro-Wiwa's *Lemona's Tale* is based on the binary oppositions of patriarchal thinking, according to which a woman represents, above all, passivity (and man activity), Saadawi's *A Woman at the Point Zero* attacks the patriarchal binarity by constructing another binary pattern, which partly explains the work's consistently negative image of the male. In the context of *A Woman at the Point Zero* we could talk about a binary feminist paradigm (compare Hafez 1995).

Saadawi continues the Arabic literary tradition, the well-known names of which in the West are Naguib Mahfouz who got the Nobel-prize of literature in 1988, and Yusuf Idris, who has medical education as his background, as does Saadawi. While Mahfouz and Idris continue the male tradition of Arabic literature (Mikhail 1992; Vatikiotis 1980: 433–467), Saadawi is "the most articulate activist for woman's causes in the Arab world" (Malti-Douglas 1991: 111). It has also been argued that Saadawi has consciously broken the Arabic literary tradition and adopted a simpler style in order to make her work approachable to the Arabic reading audience.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o divides literature into two types: that of oppression and that of the struggle for liberation: he also questions the division between fictive and non-fictive texts. Although these conventions have been popularly applied by Western critics not only to Western but also to non-Western literature, the Kenyan writer proposes a different organization of literary categories, one which is "participatory" in the historical processes of either hegemony or resistance to domination. (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1981: 38; Harlow 1987: 9.) While emphasising the social-political contents and meanings of the texts, Ngugi is not alone among the African writers. Nawal El Saadawi, for instance, is of the opinion that the dispelling of the boundary between fictive and non-fictive texts has caused that her texts have been misread (Saadawi 1988). On the one hand, I agree with

Saadawi that one cannot wholly ignore the formal conventions of literature; on the other, I agree with Ngugi in that that ultimately the most interesting question is, whether, for example, prison literature serves oppression or struggle for liberation. 'A prison journey' is here, however, crucially a category of content.

If we apply the two-branched category of Ngugi to the fictive texts of *Lemona's Tale* and *A Woman at the Point Zero*, as well as Saro-Wiwa's documentary work *A Month and a Day. A Detention Diary* (1995) and Saadawi's documentary work *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* (1986), one of them is clearly different. It is almost impossible to see *Lemona's Tale* as a liberating work calling for liberation or as part of resistance literature. Saro-Wiwa has made Lemona a static and passive character whose head – with Fanon's words – has been emptied of all content by colonialism (Fanon 1982: 169). In her extreme beauty and noble mysteriousness, Lemona has been made the ideal woman of the work, and her fate – which can be characterized as sad and unhappy – is presented as a tragical one. While Saro-Wiwa and Saadawi experience their own stay in prison, as described in their prison memoirs – the former's one month and a day and the latter's three weeks and a day – hard enough, Lemona endures her 27 years as a noble and lonely prisoner with good manners. Lemona's long stay in prison derives extra glory from the fact that also Nelson Mandela spent the 27 years in prison. In sum, although Lemona tells her prison journey as an uninterrupted female monologue, it, and the whole book, has ultimately been seen through patriarchal and even sexist spectacles which only reproduce the patriarchal discourse.

As different as Saro-Wiwa's *A Month and a Day. A Detention Diary* and Saadawi's *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* and *A Woman at the Point Zero* are, they belong to the liberating branch of Ngugi's literary category: they are part of resistance literature. While the turning point of Lemona's life is when her beloved leaves her and Lemona cannot start living a comfortable and a financially secure life, Firdaus' love affair changes into her realization that the man has turned the woman's love into services. Indeed, all the problems of Firdaus derive from the patriarchal system and its male members who have internalized its values. While Lemona's tale with one plot aims at the sad lot of Lemona, in Firdaus' tale, two stories cross each other. One of these deals with her drifting out to the "point of zero" of her life and the other describes her development into the membership of the resistance culture. Saro-Wiwa and Saadawi have written their personal prison diaries as political prisoners and, by implication, they self-evidently are part of post-colonial resistance. As different products of the movement, they embody the many-faceted outlook of culture of resistance. As Barbara Harlow says: "Whereas the social and the personal have tended to displace the political in western literary and cultural studies, the emphasis in the literature of resistance is on the political as the power to change the world. The theory of resistance literature is in its politics." (Harlow 1987: 30).

A tragical irony that also seems mock the boundary between fact and fiction is that Saro-Wiwa was hanged (ten years ago: in 1995) at the same Port Harcourt

prison where his fictive creation Lemona met her end. Even though he would never have been sentenced to death because of *Lemona's Tale*, had the novel been published before his death, the content of Saro-Wiwa's prison diary – grown from within the resistance movement – was too much to the military government (see Simola 1998). The end of Saro-Wiwa's personal prison journey proves true the claim that “one written word in the political cell is a more serious matter than having a pistol” (Saadawi 1991: 73).

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