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The oppression of women and the struggle against patriarchy in nawal el-saadawi's novel "woman at point zero"

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ABSTRACT

Background. Patriarchal structures have historically contributed to the marginalization, exploitation, and oppression of women, limiting their autonomy, identity, and social participation. Nawal El-Saadawi's novel *Woman at Point Zero* portrays these inequalities through Firdaus, whose experiences reveal the psychological and social consequences of gender-based oppression.
Purpose. This study aims to examine the forms of oppression experienced by women in *Woman at Point Zero* and analyze Firdaus's resistance against patriarchal structures. Specifically, it explores how gender inequality, exploitation, and restrictive social norms influence her transformation from a victim of oppression into a woman who asserts her autonomy and dignity.
Method. This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach using feminist literary analysis. Data were collected through close reading of the novel, focusing on character interactions, narrative structures, and thematic representations of oppression and resistance. The analysis examined how patriarchal power relations shape Firdaus's experiences, psychological development, and decisions within the sociocultural context of the narrative.
Results. The findings indicate that Firdaus experiences multiple forms of patriarchal oppression, including gender discrimination, psychological violence, sexual exploitation, and restrictions on personal freedom. These experiences demonstrate how patriarchal institutions perpetuate women's marginalization and reinforce unequal power relations.
Conclusion. This study concludes that *Woman at Point Zero* presents a powerful critique of patriarchal oppression while emphasizing women's resistance as a means of reclaiming agency and self-determination. Firdaus's experiences illustrate the relationship between structural inequality and individual resistance, contributing to feminist literary scholarship and highlighting the importance of challenging discriminatory social systems to promote gender equality.

KEYWORDS

Gender Equality, Patriarchy, Women's Society

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INTRODUCTION

Women's oppression and the fight against patriarchy have long been major topics in feminist writing, especially in cultures where patriarchy is ingrained. One such book is Woman at Point Zero (1975), a groundbreaking novel by Nawal El-Saadawi that offers a terrifying examination of a woman's life in a patriarchal culture.

By telling the tale of Firdaus, a woman convicted of murder and on death row, El-Saadawi challenges not just the systemic oppression of women but also the subtle social and cultural forces that uphold their inferiority. The gender disparities that were common in Egypt in the middle of the 20th century, when patriarchal standards combined with political and economic unrest, had a disastrous impact on women's life, are both personally and politically addressed in this book.

Examining how patriarchal oppression appears in the life of Firdaus, the protagonist of the book, and how she eventually rebels against and subverts these oppressive forces is the main study issue in this analysis. The novel offers a compelling lens through which to analyze the wider ramifications of female oppression in patriarchal countries because of its depiction of women's fight against patriarchy and the way that gender and sexuality intertwine within this framework. This essay seeks to clarify the ways in which patriarchal authority shapes women's lived experiences and controls their bodies, desires, and social duties by analyzing the novel via the theoretical framework of gender and sexuality.

Contextualizing the particular historical and cultural setting in which El-Saadawi's story takes place is essential to comprehending its value. Like a large portion of the Arab world, Egypt had patriarchal systems ingrained in its legal and cultural norms by the middle of the 20th century. Women were frequently viewed as second-class citizens whose value was derived from their roles as mothers and wives, and gender stereotypes were rigorously enforced. According to feminist theorists like Sylvia Walby (1990), patriarchy is a set of societal norms and behaviors where men control, subjugate, and take advantage of women. The family, the business, the legal system, and cultural standards are just a few of the institutions that support this dominance. These patriarchal structures were especially strong in El-Saadawi's Egypt, where they restricted women's freedom in all areas of life and reinforced strict gender stereotypes.

El-Saadawi's depiction of patriarchy in Woman at Point Zero is indicative of a culture that sustains conventional gender roles, in which social, legal, and religious institutions systematically deprive women of their agency. Firdaus's tale illustrates how, for instance, the institution of marriage serves as a kind of sanctioned prostitution in which women are treated like commodities and subservient to males. From her forced involvement in prostitution to her early memories of sexual abuse, Firdaus endures physical and psychological abuse on numerous occasions throughout the book. The systemic gendered violence that women experience in patriarchal society, where men dominate their bodies and work, is reflected in this violence, which is not random.

Through the institution of marriage, where women are supposed to be sexually available to their husbands while maintaining chastity and virtue in the eyes of society, the novel demonstrates how patriarchal societies regulate women's sexuality. Firdaus's interactions with men, ranging from her violent husband to her abusive uncle, demonstrate how patriarchal dominance is exercised through the manipulation of women's bodies. One could argue that her ultimate choice to become a prostitute was a radical, if contentious, declaration of control over her own body. As Firdaus charges men for access to her body, she subverts patriarchal standards that devalue women's labor and sexuality, despite the fact that prostitution is usually seen as just another type of exploitation.

Firdaus's murder of a guy who tries to take advantage of her is the pinnacle of her rebellion against the patriarchal order. This violent act is a symbolic dismantling of the systems that have kept her in servitude as well as a rejection of male domination. According to gender and sexuality theory, Firdaus reclaims her identity and body from the patriarchal society that has subjugated her in this moment, which can be seen as a radical act of gender performance. Woman at Point Zero is fundamentally a narrative about the fight against patriarchal tyranny. Firdaus's transformation from victim to control of her own fate is representative of the larger feminist movement's fight to

overthrow the structures that oppress women. The reader is prompted by El-Saadawi's book to think critically about the social mores that support women's subjugation as well as how women might rebel against and reinterpret their positions in a patriarchal society. El-Saadawi depicts a lady who, despite the possibility of losing her life, fights back against societal expectations by virtue of her portrayal of Firdaus.

This paper aims to demonstrate how Woman at Point Zero functions as a critique of patriarchy and a call to action by placing the book within the larger framework of feminist theory and the study of gender and sexuality. Firdaus's fight is not only her own; it is the fight of many women who, like her, have experienced oppression, marginalization, and silence at the hands of patriarchal structures. The novel's ability to highlight the continuous struggle for gender equality and the necessity of tearing down the systems that support women's oppression is what gives it its lasting significance.

To sum up, Woman at Point Zero by Nawal El-Saadawi is a compelling examination of how patriarchy oppresses women via the academic lenses of gender and sexuality. The novel tells a powerful story of empowerment and resistance through the depiction of Firdaus's life and her eventual revolt against the patriarchal powers attempting to subjugate her. Readers can obtain a deeper grasp of the intricacies of the fight against patriarchy and the ways in which women, like Firdaus, might regain their power in a society that aims to deny them agency by analyzing the book through the lens of gender and sexuality theory.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to analyze the themes of oppression and the fight against patriarchy in Nawal El-Saadawi's novel "Woman at Point Zero," a descriptive qualitative research methodology was employed. The goal of this kind of study is to comprehend and analyze intricate social processes, especially how women are portrayed and experienced in literature. Textual analysis is used in the data collection process, with the novel serving as the main source. To further enhance the analysis, supplementary sources such academic publications, feminist theory texts, and literary criticism are included as secondary data.

Both original data (from the book "Woman at Point Zero") and secondary data (from books, scholarly journals, and earlier research on related topics, like women's oppression and patriarchy in literature) make up the data sources. Words, sentences, and narrative structures that highlight the experiences, dialogue, and symbolic portrayals of resistance and patriarchy among the characters are the types of data that are gathered.

A content analysis approach is used to analyze the material, carefully identifying and interpreting themes, motifs, and patterns of patriarchal dominance and gender discrimination. Examining the novel's social, cultural, and historical settings as well as how they influence how women's challenges are portrayed is another aspect of the examination. Finding the underlying themes of oppression and resistance in El-Saadawi's depiction of her protagonist, Firdaus, and connecting these discoveries to more general feminist discourses are the objectives.

RESULTS AN DISCUSSION

The material is examined using a content analysis approach, which closely examines and interprets themes, motifs, and patterns of gender discrimination and patriarchal dominance. Another part of the analysis looks at the social, cultural, and historical contexts of the book and how these

affect the representation of women's struggles. The goals are to identify the underlying themes of oppression and resistance in El-Saadawi's portrayal of her protagonist, Firdaus, and relate these findings to broader feminist discourses.

Table 1. Thematic Findings on Patriarchal Oppression and Women's Resistance

Theme	Forms of oppression	Forms of resistance
Systematic oppression	Family domination, forced marriage, social inequality	Rejection of patriarchal authority
Economic independence	Financial dependence, workplace exploitation	Control over earnings and decisions
Self-identity	Objectification, imposed gender roles	Reclaiming identity and autonomy
Psychological impact	Trauma, humiliation, emotional suffering	Critical awareness and resilience
Rebellion and resistance	Sexual coercion, violence, authoritarian control	Confrontation and refusal to submit

Source: Thematic synthesis of Zahro et al. (2024), Kök and Bakırtaş (2024), Rather (2025)

The findings reveal that systematic oppression constitutes a central theme in Nawal El-Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, particularly through the experiences of Firdaus within patriarchal family and social structures. Her childhood reflects the normalization of male authority, unequal treatment, and limited opportunities for female self-determination. Patriarchal domination is reproduced through cultural expectations that position women as subordinate to men and restrict their participation in decisions affecting their lives. Firdaus's experiences demonstrate that oppression extends beyond individual acts of discrimination and operates through institutionalized power relations. Kök and Bakırtaş (2024) emphasize that the protagonist's struggle reflects the intersection of cultural, religious, political, and economic structures that sustain women's marginalization. The novel consequently illustrates how patriarchal values become embedded in everyday practices and accepted as legitimate social arrangements.

The representation of marriage further demonstrates how patriarchal institutions reinforce women's subordination and vulnerability. Firdaus's marriage exposes her to physical violence, emotional humiliation, and unequal power relations that undermine her personal dignity. Rather than functioning as a protective institution, marriage becomes another mechanism through which male authority is exercised. Her experiences challenge the assumption that socially recognized relationships necessarily guarantee women's safety and well-being. Zahro et al. (2024) identify resistance to oppression and the struggle for personal freedom as significant dimensions of Firdaus's development. The narrative reveals that women's dependence on male authority can increase their exposure to exploitation when institutional protections are inadequate. Firdaus's rejection of her abusive marriage represents an important stage in her growing awareness of gender inequality and her determination to resist oppressive social expectations.

Economic dependence emerges as a significant factor contributing to the persistence of patriarchal oppression throughout Firdaus's life. Her limited access to financial resources reduces her ability to escape exploitative relationships and establish an independent existence. The novel demonstrates that economic vulnerability operates alongside cultural restrictions, making women particularly susceptible to manipulation and coercion. Financial control becomes an instrument through which male characters maintain authority and reinforce women's subordinate positions.

Rather (2025) interprets the economic dimensions of Firdaus's experience as part of an interconnected structure involving patriarchy, capitalism, and gender-based exploitation. Her struggle illustrates that financial insecurity cannot be understood independently of the broader social conditions that restrict women's opportunities. Economic empowerment therefore requires meaningful access to resources, decision-making authority, and institutional protection against exploitation.

Firdaus's involvement in prostitution introduces a complex relationship between financial independence, bodily autonomy, and structural exploitation. Her ability to generate income and negotiate certain conditions creates a sense of control that contrasts with her earlier experiences of dependence. Nevertheless, this apparent independence remains constrained by social structures that commodify women's bodies and privilege male economic interests. The narrative challenges simplistic interpretations of empowerment by demonstrating that financial resources do not automatically eliminate oppression. Hasan (2025) examines how the regulation and exploitation of women's bodies function within broader systems of gendered power. Firdaus's circumstances expose the contradictions of economic agency within an unequal social environment. Her experiences suggest that genuine liberation requires transformation beyond individual financial success, including changes in social institutions and the distribution of power.

The development of self-identity represents another major finding, particularly as Firdaus gradually challenges the roles imposed upon her by patriarchal society. Her identity is repeatedly defined through male expectations that associate women's value with obedience, sexuality, and submission. These experiences encourage her to question the legitimacy of social arrangements that deny women independent decision-making authority. Firdaus's increasing awareness enables her to distinguish between identities imposed by others and her own understanding of personal dignity. Zahro et al. (2024) identify the search for identity, bodily control, and emotional independence as important elements of women's agency in the novel. The protagonist's transformation demonstrates that resistance begins with the recognition of oppressive structures and the rejection of externally imposed definitions of womanhood. Her struggle for self-identity therefore reflects a broader feminist concern with autonomy and self-determination.

Bodily autonomy constitutes an essential dimension of Firdaus's resistance against patriarchal domination. Throughout the novel, her body becomes a site of control, exploitation, and unequal power relations. Male characters repeatedly attempt to determine the conditions under which she can exercise personal freedom and make decisions concerning her physical existence. These experiences reveal how patriarchal power operates through both institutional arrangements and intimate relationships. Hasan (2025) applies a Foucauldian perspective to examine the regulation of women's bodies and the relationship between gender, power, and social discipline. This interpretation highlights how control over the female body contributes to the reproduction of patriarchal authority. Firdaus's resistance represents an effort to challenge these mechanisms and reclaim control over her existence. The narrative consequently positions bodily autonomy as an important component of female agency and resistance.

The psychological consequences of patriarchal oppression are reflected in Firdaus's experiences of fear, humiliation, emotional suffering, and distrust. Repeated exposure to violence and exploitation influences her understanding of interpersonal relationships and contributes to her growing skepticism toward individuals who exercise authority over her. The narrative portrays psychological suffering as closely associated with social inequality rather than merely as an individual emotional condition. Rismawati and Sunra (2024) examine the relationship between gender discrimination and mental health in the novel, emphasizing the emotional consequences of

unequal treatment and persistent violence. Firdaus's experiences demonstrate how oppressive environments can undermine self-worth and emotional security. Her developing awareness of these conditions also contributes to a more critical understanding of the social structures responsible for her suffering.

The cumulative psychological effects of oppression also influence Firdaus's transformation from passive endurance toward active resistance. Her experiences reveal that prolonged exposure to exploitation can produce complex emotional responses, including anger, disappointment, alienation, and the rejection of previously accepted social expectations. These responses do not necessarily represent a linear progression toward psychological recovery. Instead, they demonstrate the complicated relationship between suffering, consciousness, and agency. Hasan (2025) identifies internalized trauma and cultural conditioning as significant dimensions of women's subordination within the narrative. Firdaus's increasing resistance can therefore be interpreted as a response to repeated violations of her autonomy and dignity. Her psychological transformation illustrates how oppressive experiences can shape the development of critical awareness, although such awareness does not automatically resolve the consequences of trauma.

Rebellion becomes a defining feature of Firdaus's development as she increasingly rejects the authority of individuals who attempt to control her life. Her resistance emerges from the accumulation of experiences involving physical violence, sexual exploitation, and economic inequality. The narrative portrays rebellion as a response to institutional failures that prevent women from obtaining protection and justice through conventional social mechanisms. Zahro et al. (2024) identify radical decision-making and rejection of oppressive authority as important dimensions of Firdaus's agency. Her confrontation with patriarchal domination therefore represents a significant transformation in her understanding of freedom. Nevertheless, her resistance should not be interpreted as evidence that violence is inherently liberating. Rather, the narrative invites critical reflection on the circumstances in which oppressive structures restrict access to nonviolent alternatives.

Firdaus's killing of her pimp constitutes the most dramatic representation of resistance within the novel. This action occurs after repeated experiences of exploitation and her confrontation with a man who attempts to exercise control over her autonomy and economic activities. The episode represents a decisive rejection of domination, although it also introduces serious ethical questions concerning violence, responsibility, and justice. Rather (2025) interprets Firdaus's experiences through the interconnected concepts of power, resistance, and social oppression. Her actions can be understood as a literary representation of resistance arising from extreme structural vulnerability rather than as a universal model of women's liberation. The narrative exposes the contradictions of a social environment in which oppressive individuals frequently exercise authority while those who resist encounter severe punishment.

The representation of imprisonment and Firdaus's refusal to seek forgiveness introduces another dimension of resistance. Although her physical freedom is completely restricted, she maintains a sense of personal autonomy by refusing to accept the legitimacy of the authority that condemns her. This distinction between physical confinement and psychological resistance challenges conventional assumptions about freedom and submission. Kök and Bakırtaş (2024) emphasize the importance of emancipation and self-awareness in understanding Firdaus's transformation. Her refusal to surrender her convictions becomes a symbol of resistance against institutions that perpetuate unequal power relations. The novel consequently raises questions about whether genuine freedom can exist within social structures that systematically deny women's rights.

Firdaus's final decisions reveal both the possibilities and the profound limitations of individual resistance within a deeply unequal society.

The sociocultural context of *Woman at Point Zero* provides an essential framework for understanding the relationship between individual experiences and structural oppression. The novel situates Firdaus's struggles within a society shaped by unequal gender relations, economic disparities, and cultural expectations regarding women's behavior. Her experiences reveal how family arrangements, employment conditions, and social judgments contribute to the reproduction of patriarchal authority. Akah (2026) introduces the concept of patriarchal abandonment to explain situations in which women remain bound by social obligations while institutions fail to provide adequate protection and support. This perspective contributes to the interpretation of Firdaus's experiences by emphasizing the relationship between structural vulnerability and survival. The novel demonstrates that women's oppression cannot be adequately understood through individual relationships alone because these experiences are embedded within broader cultural and institutional arrangements.

The findings also highlight the contribution of El-Saadawi's narrative to contemporary feminist literary discourse. Through Firdaus's experiences, the novel exposes the relationship between gender inequality, bodily control, economic exploitation, and the struggle for individual agency. The narrative challenges patriarchal assumptions by presenting a protagonist who progressively recognizes and confronts the structures responsible for her subordination. Dewi et al. (2026) identify marginalization, subordination, stereotyping, violence, and unequal domestic responsibilities as significant dimensions of gender injustice represented in the novel. These categories provide a framework for understanding how different forms of oppression interact rather than operate independently. The present analysis extends this interpretation by emphasizing the relationship between psychological suffering, economic vulnerability, and resistance. *Woman at Point Zero* consequently remains relevant to feminist literary studies because it encourages critical examination of the institutional and cultural mechanisms through which gender inequalities are maintained and challenged.

CONCLUSION

Studying Nawal El Saadawi's Woman at Point Zero offers a deep investigation of women's oppression in patriarchal societies and their fight for identity and autonomy. The story draws attention to the interplay of gender, power, and socioeconomic aspects by highlighting the systematic abuse and marginalization of women through the figure of Firdaus. The results show how Firdaus's experiences reflect larger societal problems, such as the prevalence of gender-based violence and the difficulties women encounter in reaching financial independence. This research's logical ramifications go beyond literary analysis; they have important ramifications for the advancement of science and the practice of Islamic education. The study promotes more investigation into the socio-cultural processes that influence women's experiences in various circumstances within the framework of scientific inquiry. To better comprehend the intricacies of gender oppression and emancipation, it highlights the need for interdisciplinary research that integrates feminist theory, sociology, and cultural studies. Regarding Islamic education, the lessons learned from El Saadawi's story push academics and teachers to reevaluate conventional understandings of gender roles in Islamic literature. Women's empowerment and the advancement of gender parity ought to be essential elements of school curricula. Islamic education may significantly contribute to the breakdown of patriarchal systems and the promotion of social justice

by promoting an inclusive discourse that values various interpretations and elevates the voices of women. Woman at Point Zero is a potent reminder of the need for structural change and the continuous fight against gender inequality. The study emphasizes how critical it is to acknowledge women's agency in literature and in contemporary culture. By critically analyzing El Saadawi's writings, we may motivate action to advance women's equality and justice and create a more just society that recognizes the rights and contributions of every person.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist with English language translation, academic writing refinement, and improvements in grammatical accuracy and clarity. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.
Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.
Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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