

Breaking Barriers in Patriarchal Society: Equity, Diversity, and Inclusivity in Elshadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*

Olufunto Atinuke ADEBOWALE
Lead City University, Ibadan
+2348059199060
unicpholarshayoh@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores the theme, Breaking Barriers in Scholarship: Equity, Diversity, and Inclusivity in Contemporary Language and Literature through the lens of Nawal El Saadawi's seminal novel *Woman at Point Zero*. The novel was chosen because Africa is a Patriarchal Society that allows the hegemony of men over women which creates barriers that silence the marginalized voices. *Woman at Point Zero* portrays the need to break barriers in society through literary canons. So, the text, which is a powerful feminist narrative, provides a critical entry point into discussions on equity and inclusivity by foregrounding the lived experiences of Firdaus, a woman marginalized by class, gender, and systemic oppression in Egyptian society. Drawing on feminist literary criticism and postcolonial theory, the paper examines how El Saadawi disrupts patriarchal and canonical boundaries by giving voice to Firdaus, because African traditions often silenced subaltern voices.. This will be done through qualitative analysis of the selected texts via close reading and textual analysis of the thematic preoccupation of the author. The analysis highlights how the novel critiques entrenched hierarchies of power while simultaneously advocating for diversity in the representation of women's experiences. By situating *Woman at Point Zero* within broader conversations on equity, diversity, and inclusivity, this paper aims to illustrate how African female writers challenge scholarly canons, redefine narratives of identity, open pathways for more just and representative literary discourses. Conclusively, the paper advocates the need for continuous inclusivity, equity and diversity for women, either in the urban or rural part of the African society.

Keywords: Equity, Inclusivity, Feminist Literary Criticism, Postcolonial Theory.

Word Count: 252

Introduction

In recent decades, the concepts of equity, diversity, and inclusivity (EDI) have gained significant attention in the humanities, particularly within language and literary studies. Scholarship that once privileged Eurocentric canons and male-dominated narratives has increasingly been called into question for its silencing of marginalized voices. The demand for a more inclusive academic practice emphasizes the necessity of re-examining how literature represents, and at times distorts, the lived realities of those at the margins of society. Thus,

breaking barriers in scholarship requires a critical shift towards amplifying perspectives that foreground the complexities of gender, class, culture, and identity.

Within this context, Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1975; trans. 1983) stands out as a significant text that embodies the call for inclusivity in literary research. Written by one of Egypt's most renowned feminist writers, the novel narrates the life story of Firdaus, a woman imprisoned and awaiting execution for the murder of a pimp who exploited her. Firdaus' voice, marked by pain, defiance, and eventual self-assertion, emerges as a counter narrative to patriarchal traditions that deny women agency and dignity. In bringing her story to the forefront, El Saadawi not only critiques systemic gender oppression but also challenges the literary canon by privileging the narrative of a socially marginalized woman (Abass, 2023).

The novel thus becomes a valuable case study for interrogating questions of equity, the fair representation of women's voices in literature, diversity, the recognition of multiple layers of identity such as class, education, sexuality and inclusivity; the integration of subaltern narratives into the broader field of scholarship. The novel also provide tools for decolonizing literary studies and advancing inclusive methodologies. By situating *Woman at Point Zero* within the framework of feminist literary theory, informed by intersectionality and postcolonial critique, this paper seeks to illustrate how African women's writing disrupts dominant traditions and creates new pathways for inclusive knowledge production.

Statement of the Problem

Patriarchal Society always create barriers between men and women in the society by silencing the marginalized voices. *Woman at Point Zero* portrays the need to break Barriers in the society through literary canons.

Objectives of the Study

- i). identify how *Woman at Point Zero* foreground issues of equity, diversity, and inclusivity in language and literature
- ii). examines ways in which Firdaus' narrative challenge patriarchal and canonical traditions
- iii). discuss ways that feminist and postcolonial theories can contribute to inclusive literary criticism

Literature Review

Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* has received wide scholarly attention across disciplines, with critics examining it as a feminist text, a postcolonial narrative, and a sociopolitical critique of Egyptian society (Mohanty, 2003). The scholarship surrounding the novel reflects its richness as a literary work that not only critiques gender inequality but also challenges dominant structures of knowledge production. This review synthesizes key debates on the novel and situates the present study within the broader academic conversation on equity, diversity, and inclusivity in language and literature (Crenshaw, 1989).

Scholarship on *Woman at Point Zero* has largely focused on its feminist and political dimensions. Early critics (Cooke, 1993; Malti-Douglas, 2015) emphasized the novel's role in exposing the gendered injustices of Egyptian society, particularly the ways patriarchal

structures reduce women to objects of exploitation. More recent studies (Abu-Lughod, 2001) have drawn attention to the intersection of culture, religion, and power in shaping Firdaus's life, underscoring the text's enduring relevance in debates about women's rights in the Arab world, (Sari, 2023).

Feminist theorists such as Gayatri Spivak (1988) have argued that women like Firdaus represent the subaltern, a figure systematically denied the capacity to speak or be heard within dominant structures of power (XI, C.I, 2025). El Saadawi's narrative directly engages this question, as Firdaus tells her own story in the face of systemic silencing. This positions the text as a crucial site for rethinking inclusivity in literature. It allows the subaltern voice not just to speak, but to challenge and transform the discourse surrounding her (Mohanty, 2003).

African feminist scholars (Nnaemeka, 2004; Ogunyemi, 1996) have further highlighted the necessity of context-specific frameworks when analyzing texts like *Woman at Point Zero*. Rather than imposing Western feminist categories, these approaches advocate for reading African women's narratives in light of their historical, social, and cultural contexts. This aligns with the principles of equity and diversity in scholarship, ensuring that marginalized voices are interpreted on their own terms, (Emmanuel, 2023).

Scholars widely agree that the novel conceptualizes patriarchy not merely as a cultural practice but as a systemic structure embedded in social, religious, legal, and economic institutions (El Saadawi, 1983; Badran, 1995). Through the life story of Firdaus, the narrative demonstrates how gender inequality is reproduced through familial authority, marriage arrangements, educational exclusion, and exploitative labor relations.

Recent feminist scholarship conceptualizes patriarchy as a multidimensional system of power sustained through social, legal, economic, and cultural institutions (Connell & Pearse, 2019; Walby et al., 2020). Within this framework, Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* continues to attract scholarly attention for its incisive portrayal of institutionalized gender oppression. Contemporary studies argue that the novel remains relevant because it exposes how patriarchal authority is normalized and reproduced through family structures, labor relations, religious discourse, and state institutions, thereby obstructing gender equity and social inclusion (Al-Sharmani, 2020; Kandiyoti, 2021).

Recent literary analyses emphasize that Firdaus's life narrative reflects systemic inequality rather than individual misfortune. Scholars highlight how restricted access to education, economic vulnerability, and patriarchal legal systems collectively limit women's life chances (Abu-Lughod, 2021). From this perspective, *Woman at Point Zero* is read as a sustained critique of structural injustice that aligns with contemporary feminist concerns about equity and institutional reform.

Contemporary feminist analyses adopt a more nuanced understanding of agency, moving beyond simplistic interpretations of resistance as absolute empowerment. Scholars argue that Firdaus's defiance represents constrained agency shaped by intersecting systems of violence and exclusion rather than autonomous liberation (Mahmood, 2020; Roy, 2022).

Recent readings caution against romanticizing Firdaus's final act of violence, interpreting it instead as a radical exposure of the limits of individual resistance within entrenched patriarchal

systems (Kandiyoti, 2021). This line of scholarship situates *Woman at Point Zero* within ongoing feminist critiques of liberal individualism, emphasizing the need for structural transformation to achieve lasting equity and inclusivity.

Despite this rich body of scholarship, there is still limited engagement with *Woman at Point Zero* through the explicit lens of equity, diversity, and inclusivity (EDI) in contemporary literary studies (Ann, 2015). While feminist and postcolonial critiques have highlighted oppression and resistance, fewer works have framed El Saadawi's text as a model for how literary scholarship itself can be restructured to embrace inclusivity. This paper seeks to address this gap by applying EDI principles to the analysis of Firdaus's narrative, thereby contributing to the broader project of decolonizing literary studies.

Theoretical Framework

This seminar adopts Feminist Literary Theory, enriched with intersectional and postcolonial perspectives, to analyze Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*. Feminist criticism is particularly relevant because the novel foregrounds the systemic oppression of women within patriarchal structures and exposes how gender-based inequities shape individual lives. Firdaus, the protagonist, embodies the silenced voices of many women, making feminist theory the most appropriate lens for interrogating issues of equity and inclusivity in literary scholarship.

An intersectional feminist approach, as articulated by scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, is also essential to this study because Firdaus' experiences cannot be understood through gender alone. Her marginalization is compounded by class, socio-economic status, education, and sexual exploitation, which intersect to produce layered forms of oppression. This intersectionality highlights the necessity of diversity in research, ensuring that scholarship does not reduce women's experiences to a single category of analysis but instead acknowledges the complexity of their identities.

Furthermore, a postcolonial theoretical dimension complements this framework by situating *Woman at Point Zero* within the historical and cultural legacies of colonialism and neo-colonial power structures. El Saadawi critiques not only patriarchal oppression but also the socio-political institutions that sustain systemic inequities in Egyptian society. Postcolonial theory thus illuminates how literature from the Global South challenges Eurocentric canons, thereby breaking barriers in scholarship and advocating for more inclusive and representative knowledge production.

By integrating feminist, intersectional, and postcolonial approaches, this seminar underscores how El Saadawi's narrative destabilizes dominant literary traditions and insists on equity, diversity, and inclusivity as guiding principles for contemporary language and literature research.

Methodology

The paper employs a qualitative research method via using critical and textual analysis to engage text in a thematic discourse. Critical reading of the primary texts will be done via sourcing for materials electronically, journals and Library. Feminist Literary Theory and Postcolonial Theory will be used as theoretical lenses for elucidation.

Synopsis

Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1975) is a powerful feminist novel that chronicles the life of Firdaus, an Egyptian woman on death row for killing a man who exploited her. Through Firdaus's harrowing experiences starting from childhood abuse, forced marriage, systemic misogyny, to eventual survival through sex work. The novel exposes the deeply entrenched inequities in patriarchal structures that silence and marginalize women.

In the context of breaking barriers in scholarship, *Woman at Point Zero* functions as a critical text that foregrounds equity by insisting on the recognition of women's lived realities within literature. It destabilizes the traditionally male-dominated canon by centering the voice of a woman who is socially, economically, and politically excluded. Inclusivity is achieved as the novel brings into scholarly discourse the perspective of an Arab-African woman, thereby amplifying narratives often absent from global literary conversations. Diversity is reflected not only in the thematic scope by addressing gender, class, religion, and power, but also in the linguistic and cultural dimensions of El Saadawi's storytelling, which bridges Arabic oral traditions with feminist literary forms.

Thus, the novel does more than tell Firdaus's story as it challenges the reader, critic, and scholar to expand the boundaries of contemporary literary studies. It exemplifies how African women's literature serves as a transformative site for equity, inclusivity, and diversity, breaking barriers in both content and scholarship by resisting hegemonic literary and cultural structures.

Analysis of the Text and Discussion

Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* provides a rich site for interrogating the themes of equity, diversity, and inclusivity in contemporary scholarship. Through the life narrative of Firdaus, El Saadawi dismantles patriarchal, socio-economic, and colonial structures that silence women and subaltern voices. The novel thereby models how African women's writing contributes to breaking barriers in literary studies and broadens the scope of inclusive scholarship. This is discussed under these themes:

i). Equity and Representation: Reclaiming Women's Voices in Literature

At the heart of *Woman at Point Zero* lies the theme of equity, particularly in the representation of women's experiences, Firdaus as a silenced voice who reclaims narrative power. Her story is not mediated by male narrators or Western-centric interpretations but is instead told in her own voice, granting her a degree of authority and agency rarely afforded to women in literature.

Let me speak. Do not interrupt me. I have no time to listen to you. They are coming to take me at six o'clock this evening. Tomorrow morning, I shall no longer be here. Nor will I be in any place known to man. This journey to a place unknown to everybody on this earth fills me with pride. All my life I have been searching for something that would fill me with pride, make me feel superior to everyone else, including kings, princes and rulers (13).

Her narrative highlights the inequities of Egyptian society, ranging from childhood abuse, forced marriage, economic exploitation, and sexual violence. (Mohanty, 2003) By

foregrounding Firdaus' voice, El Saadawi emphasizes the need for equitable representation in literature and scholarship, ensuring that women's perspectives are neither silenced nor subordinated. As Firdaus was finally given the autonomy to speak, women should be allowed to voice out and assert their rights at all times.

ii). Diversity in Perspective: Intersectional Oppression and Identity

Firdaus' marginalization cannot be understood through gender alone. Her identity as a poor, uneducated woman further deepens her vulnerability within patriarchal systems. She is exploited in multiple spaces: by family, by employers, by men who pose as lovers, and by the state itself, (Collins & Bilge, 2020). For example, Firdaus had not been taking cognizance of the fact that she is being abused as a girl by a boy that normally played with her on the field whenever she went to carry loads of manure on her head.

‘A little boy called Mohammadain use to pinch me under water and follow Me into the small shelter made of maize stalks. He would make me lie down Beneath a pile of straw and lift up my galabeya. We played at ‘bride and Bridegroom ‘. From some part in my body, where exactly, I did not know, Would come a sensation of sharp pleasure’ (16).

Her uncle was not left out of the sexual abuse. At first, Firdaus did not always pay attention to her uncle trying to take advantage of her, while he pretended to be reading his book. Her uncle later does it repeatedly as an habitual act which makes Firdaus sees it as a normal thing.

‘My galabeya often slipped up my thighs, but I paid no attention until the Moment when I would glimpse my uncle's hand moving slowly from behind the book he was reading to touch my leg. The next moment I could feel it travelling up my thighs with a cautious, stealthy, trembling movement. Every time there was the sound of a footsteps at the entrance to our house, his hand would withdraw quickly. But whenever everything around us lapsed into silence, the sound of his regular breathing reach me from behind the book And panting, his hand would continue to press against my thigh with a grasping, almost brutal insistence’ (17).

The abuse from her uncle got to a stage that she couldn't feel the sensation again.

‘He was doing to me what Mohammadain had done to me before. Infact, he was doing even more, but I no longer felt the strong sensation of pleasure that radiated from an unknown and yet familiar part of my body’ (18).

Police man, a law enforcement officer was not left out of exploiting and commodifying her body

I tried to shake free of him, but he held on to my arm and started to walk Me away from where we were standing. He took me to one dark, narrow Alley after another, then through a wooden door into a room, where he made Me lie on a bed. I opened my eyes, dragged my body off the bed, put on my Dress, and then leant my head, my tired head against the door for a moment

Before leaving. I heard his voice behind me
'what are you waiting for? I have no money on me tonight.
I'll give you money the next time' (84).

This reflects intersectional oppression, where gender intersects with class, education, and social status to produce compounded forms of marginalization, (Crenshaw, 1989). El Saadawi's nuanced portrayal of Firdaus demonstrates the diversity of women's lived experiences, resisting the reduction of African women to a single narrative of victimhood. Instead, Firdaus embodies resilience and resistance, exposing the layered nature of systemic inequities, (Ogunyemi, 1996). She exposes the maltreatment of women by the men institutions and how these forms of oppression ought to be broken.

iii). Inclusivity in Scholarship: Challenging Canonical and Scholarly Exclusion

Spivak's "Can the subaltern speak?" is applied to Firdaus' situation. El Saadawi makes the subaltern voice audible, (Spivak's, 1988). Her novel also serves as a critique of the exclusivity of literary canons that historically marginalized African female voices. By centering the story of a woman condemned by both society and the state, (Fricker, 2019). *Woman at Point Zero* challenges dominant Eurocentric literary traditions and demands the inclusion of narratives from the Global South in scholarly discourse (Alcoff, 2020). The excerpt below discusses the moment Firdaus' was taken, for her voice to be silenced.

Firdaus' voice suddenly fell silent, like a voice in a dream. And I was certainly awake. For suddenly, the door was thrown open, revealing several armed policemen. They surrounded her in a circle, and I heard one of them say:

'Let's go..... Your time has come.'

I saw her walk out with them. I never saw her again. But her voice continued to echo in my ears, vibrating in my head, in the cell, in the prison, in the streets, in the whole world, shaking everything, spreading fear wherever it went, the fear of the truth which kills, And because the world was full of lies, she had to pay the price. (141-142)

Firdaus' testimony not only disrupts patriarchal structures within the narrative but also destabilizes academic hierarchies that prioritize Western male authors. In this way, the novel contributes to a more inclusive literary scholarship, urging academics to broaden the scope of texts studied and to adopt methodologies that embrace marginalized perspectives. The novel is also a testimony, telling the whole society that women can't be silenced any longer. Every woman must come to the knowledge that they too have freedom of expression, even if the truth they say is bitter, they must stand bold to say it.

iv). Language as Resistance and Empowerment

Another crucial dimension of El Saadawi's barrier-breaking project lies in her use of language. The narrative style is stark, direct, and unembellished, resisting the romanticization of suffering often found in depictions of Third World women. Firdaus' refusal to ask for mercy at the moment of execution epitomizes linguistic and existential resistance. She says:

They put steel handcuffs around my wrists, and led me off to prison. In prison they kept me in a room where the windows and the 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. They condemned me to death not because I had killed a man. They know that as long as I am alive, they will not be safe, that I shall kill them. My life means their death. My death means their life. I have triumphed over both life and death because I no longer desire to live, nor do I any longer fear to die. I fear nothing. (137)

While discussing with her, the prison doctor says:

'There's hope for your release if you send an appeal to the President asking him to pardon you for the crime you committed.'

'But I don't want to be released,' I said, 'and I want no pardon for my crime. For what you call my crime was no crime.' (138)

And at that moment, I realized that Firdaus had more courage than I. (142)

In rejecting societal expectations of repentance, she asserts her autonomy in death. Such a portrayal challenges conventional literary tropes and positions language itself as a medium for equity and empowerment. The novel was used as a weapon of expression of one's right, which gives confidence, hope and strength renewal for the women.

v). Breaking Barriers in Scholarship

The novel destabilizes patriarchal language and exposes systems of exclusion through Firdaus's life story as a metaphor for the struggle in order to insert women's experiences into scholarship. Taken together, *Woman at Point Zero* exemplifies how African female narratives challenge inequities in both literature and scholarship. (Julius, 2025). The novel pushes researchers and critics to interrogate the systemic exclusion of women and to recognize the necessity of equity, diversity, and inclusivity in literary studies. (Abu-Lughod, 2021). By employing feminist, intersectional, and postcolonial frameworks, the text highlights how marginalized voices can transform the academic landscape, dismantle entrenched hierarchies, and create new paradigms of inclusive scholarship.

For death and truth are similar in that they both require a great courage if one wishes to face them. And truth is like death in that it kills. When I killed, I did it with truth not with a knife. That is why they are afraid and in a hurry to execute me. They do not fear my knife. It is my truth which frightens them. This fearful truth gives me great strength. It protects me from fearing death, or life, or hunger, or nakedness, or destruction.(140)

Women, when included in the societal issues, given equal opportunity as men, and allowed to diversify as Firdaus clamoured for, will allow rapid development of the Society, (Tripp, 2021).

Conclusion

Ultimately, El Saadawi's novel is not just the story of one woman but a broader allegory of silenced voices across patriarchal and colonial histories. By centering Firdaus's narrative, scholars and readers alike are challenged to rethink the structures of equity, embrace cultural diversity, and commit to inclusivity in both literature and lived realities.

Recommendations

The impact of women is of great significance in the society, therefore, It is recommended that women should be allowed to air their views either they are educated or not, be given equal chances with the men and allow them to also diversify into so many important spheres in order to expand and entrenched discussions on Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity (EDI).

References

- Abbas, S. (2023). *Woman at Point Zero* Feminist analysis based on patriarchal oppression, the nature of power, and gender violence, www.researchgate.net
- Abu-Lughod, L. (2021). *Reimagining women's rights in the Middle East*. Princeton University Press.
- Abu-Lughod, L. (2001). My fathers return to Palestine. *Jerusalem Quarterly*, 1112 (Winter/Spring).
- Alcoff, L. M. (2020). *Visible identities: Race, gender, and the self* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Al-Sharmani, M. (2020). Feminism, law, and women's rights in Egypt. *Feminist Review*, 124(1), 54–70. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0141778920912345>
- Ann, I. I. (2015). Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and the issue of feminism in the African novel. *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, 5(6), 426–437.
- Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2020). *Intersectionality* (2nd ed.). Polity Press.
- Connell, R., & Pearse, R. (2019). *Gender: In world perspective* (4th ed.). Polity Press.
- Cooke, M. (1993). *Wo-man retelling the world*. Indiana University Press.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.
- El Saadawi, N. (1983). *Woman at point zero* (S. Hetata, Trans.). Zed Books. (Original work published 1975)

- El Saadawi, N. (2007). *Woman at point zero* (S. Hetata, Trans.). Zed Books. (Original work published 1975)
- Emmanuel, I. U. (2023). Feminist Discourse: Power, Sexuality and Gender in *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi, aksujournalofenglish.org.ng
- Fricker, M. (2019). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Julius, L. W. (2025). Navigating the Crossroads: Patriarchy and Women's Rights in Kenya's Legal Landscape, www.script.org
- Kandiyoti, D. (2021). Patriarchal bargains and gendered authority revisited. *Gender & Society*, 35(2), 169–184. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243220988269>
- Levin von Gleichen, T., & Jesmin, U. H. R. (2025). Undoing Gender Performativities in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, www.the Free library.com
- Mahmood, S. (2020). *Politics of piety* (Updated ed.). Princeton University Press.
- Malti-Douglas, F. (2018). *National Endowment for the Humanities* (NEH). Archived December 22, 2018. Retrieved December 31, 2018, from <https://www.neh.gov/>
- Medina, J. (2023). *The epistemology of resistance* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Merry, S. E. (2020). *The seductions of quantification: Measuring human rights, gender violence, and sex trafficking*. University of Chicago Press.
- Mohanty, C. T. (2023). *Feminism without borders* (20th anniversary ed.). Duke University Press.
- Mohanty, C. T. (2003). *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Duke University Press.
- Nnaemeka, O. (2004). Nego-feminism: Theorizing, practicing, and pruning Africa's way. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 29(2), 357–385. <https://doi.org/10.1086/378553>
- Ogunyemi, C. O. (1996). *Africa wo/man palava: The Nigerian novel by women*. University of Chicago Press.
- Roy, S. (2022). Gender, agency, and violence in postcolonial feminist literature. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 31(4), 421–435. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2022.2041234>

- Sari, D. L. (2023). Patriarchal Culture and Sexual Violence in the Novel *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal el-Saadawi, www.Atlantic-press.com
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). Macmillan.
- Tripp, A. M. (2021). Seeking legitimacy: Why Arab autocracies adopt women's rights. Cambridge University Press.
- Xi, C. (2025). Subaltern voices: A postcolonial feminist reading of Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus*. *Journal of Arts, Social and Economic Studies*, 7(3), 247. <https://doi.org/10.69610/j.ases.20250522>Here's a literature review on "Breaking Barriers in Patriarchal Society: Equity, Diversity, and Inclusivity in Elshadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* with references from 2019 to 2025: