

# UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S POWER IN A PATRIARCHY SOCIETY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NAWAL EL SAADAWI'S WOMEN AT POINT ZERO

Ilham Zhanuar Zahro<sup>1)</sup>, Samsul Hadi<sup>2)</sup>, Saptantohari Wibawa<sup>3)</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup> Prodi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris STKIP PGRI Pacitan

E-mail: [ilhamsunglun@gmail.com](mailto:ilhamsunglun@gmail.com)<sup>1</sup>; [samsulhadi0702106401@gmail.com](mailto:samsulhadi0702106401@gmail.com)<sup>2</sup>; [saptantowibawa@gmail.com](mailto:saptantowibawa@gmail.com)<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract:** This research aims to understand the concept of women's power within the context of patriarchy society as portrayed in Nawal El Saadawi's novel *Women at Point Zero*. This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach to describe the phenomena that occur systematically, factually, and accurately. The data of this research specifically utilizes data in the form of words, phrases, and sentences. This research focuses on women's power in the novel. The technique of collecting data consists of reading a novel carefully, understanding the content of the novel, and underlying the data about women's power in the novel. The techniques for analyzing data include classified data, interpreting the data, and drawing conclusions. This research found the concept of women's power is portrayed by the main character, Firdaus. Firdaus shows that women's power can be achieved by those who make determined decisions and remain strong in adversity or injustice.

**Keywords:** Women's Power, Patriarchy, Feminism, Nawal El Saadawi, Firdaus

## INTRODUCTION

English plays a crucial role as an international communication tool worldwide. Its significance is evident in various aspects of life, including trade, communication, law, and international economy (Siregar, 2023). Despite not always being the first language in some European countries like the Netherlands, France, Germany, and Italy, English remains an integral part of the educational curriculum globally, including in Indonesia. Its widespread use in a global context has established it as an essential communication tool. Many countries worldwide acknowledge the importance of mastering English as a crucial skill in facing global dynamics (Helmiana, 2023). It is not merely a means of communication but also a medium for understanding and accessing international information. English's presence has permeated various layers of life, encompassing vital sectors such as trade, tourism, and science.

In the realm of education in Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language, emphasizing the importance of English proficiency in facing global challenges. Students are taught not only to understand grammar and vocabulary but also to develop speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills in English (Helmiana, 2023). The goal of English education in Indonesia is to equip the younger generation to communicate effectively in

the global context, opening opportunities for active participation in the ongoing global developments.

Literature serves as an effective means of communication, especially through written and oral works. The teaching of literature in educational settings plays a crucial role in honing various language skills, such as reading, listening, speaking, and writing, all of which are interconnected and mutually supportive (Sukirman, 2021). In literature instruction, the mediums for creating literary works can vary, including the use of technology, visual media, and photography. Modern technology provides new opportunities for creating innovative literary works and utilizing digital platforms (Supriani, 2018). Visual elements such as images and photos can also be integrated into literary works, adding a visual dimension to enhance the reading experience.

A novel is a form of narrative prose literary work characterized by its lengthy and complex plot. In its form, a novel encompasses deep characters, settings, and themes, creating a comprehensive reading experience (Prasasti Lubis, 2022). The primary function of a novel is to serve as a medium for representing life within social reality, providing a broad and profound portrayal of various aspects of human and societal existence. According to Amna et al. (2022), a novel is a literary work that contains a person's life experiences or ideas that are put into writing so that everyone can read it. Furthermore, novels often contain educational values that can broaden readers' insights into various aspects of life. The moral messages embedded in novels can also offer lessons and reflections on human behavior.

*Women at Point Zero* is a novel by Nawal El Saadawi, originally published in Arabic in 1975 with the title "*Emra'a enda noktāt el sifr*" and later translated into various languages in 1983. The story focuses on the narrative of Firdaus, a woman who reveals her life experiences before facing execution (Susan Thampy, 2021). Firdaus becomes the primary voice depicting the roles and positions of women in a society influenced by patriarchy.

The novel touches on themes of women's oppression in the Middle East, presenting a critique of social norms that hinder women's freedom. Saadawi's work is praised by critics for its courage in exposing the reality of such oppression (Maulidia, 2019). Despite receiving acclaim, *Women at Point Zero* also sparked controversy due to

its sharp perspective on violence and male dominance in the Arab-Islamic context. The novel serves not only as a literary work but also as a medium to raise awareness about gender inequality and social injustice in Middle Eastern society. Saadawi uses Firdaus's story as a mirror to highlight the complexity of women's powers against norms that impede their freedom and rights (Susan Thampy, 2021).

Research related to Nawal El Saadawi's novel *Women at Point Zero* explores various complex aspects, including the ambivalence of women's power, prostitution, the subjugation of women in Arab society, and resistance to violence against women (Suprpto & Hesty Setyorini, 2023). Several studies have been conducted to delve into the ambivalence of women's power and prostitution that emerges in this novel. Saadawi not only portrays women as victims but also as agents capable of harnessing their power in challenging situations. In feminist studies, researchers explore this concept of ambivalence and how women in the novel can create empowerment through strategies such as prostitution as a form of survival.

However, previous research has not fully explored the issues of women's power in the implied patriarchy context of "*Women at Point Zero*." Therefore, there is a need to delve into aspects that may have been overlooked or not thoroughly examined. Some recent studies suggest the use of feminist theoretical frameworks and qualitative analysis approaches to better understand and depict the complex dynamics of women's power in this novel.

This research not only fills knowledge gaps by exploring dimensions that were previously uncovered but also enriches the discourse on women's power in the patriarchy context. Specialized theoretical analyses that encompass feminist concepts offer new insights into how Saadawi presents the dynamics of women's power, providing a richer and nuanced understanding of characters Firdaus. By better understanding the cultural background and values of Arab society contained in Saadawi's work, this research provide a more enriched and contextual perspective on the portrayal of women's power in the novel.

Therefore, the researcher took the initiative to examine the study of women's power in the context of patriarchy through the Nawal El Saadawi's Novel *Women at Point Zero*. This research is relevant because the focus of previous studies is still limited to aspects such as the ambivalence of women's power and prostitution, while the dimensions

of women's power in the context of patriarchy have not been explored in depth. Saadawi boldly criticizes social norms that hinder women's freedom, making this novel a medium to raise awareness of gender inequality and social injustice in Middle Eastern society. This research is very useful to fill the knowledge gap by exploring aspects that were previously neglected or not thoroughly analyzed.

Based on the background of the research. The researcher will conduct research entitled “UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S POWER IN A PATRIARCHY SOCIETY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NAWAL EL SAADAWI’S WOMEN AT POINT ZERO”

## **METHOD**

This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach that aims to describe the phenomena that occur systematically, factually, and accurately. The data used in this research specifically utilize data in the form of words, phrases, and sentences. The main data source in this research used the Nawal El Saadawi’s Novel *Women at Point Zero*, the latest edition published in 2007 by Zed Book, 128 pages, translated by Sherif Hetata and distributed by Palgrave Macmillan New York. Secondary data sources are several ebooks, articles, and ejournals.

The researchers use the instruments of this research are human instruments, and field notes and reading record checklists as tools to facilitate conducting research. The data collection technique consists of 1.) Read the Nawal El Saadawi’s Novel *Women at Point Zero* as a whole and repeated it carefully, 2.) Noted the data found after reading the whole novel, 3.) Identify and explain the data found related the main character, 4.) Classify the data found to be analyzed, related to the oppression, exploitation, and power of the main character. The techniques for analyzing data in this research, researchers utilized Miles and Huberman's theory to analyze data as follows; data reducing, data display, and conclusions drawing.

## **FINDING**

As a result of the research on the concept of women's power understood in the context of a patriarchy society through Nawal El Saadawi’s novel *Women at Point Zero*, researchers found 6 categories of the concept of women's power, consist of;

### **Struggle Again Oppression**

*“One day he hit me with his heavy stick until the blood ran from my nose and ears. So, I left, but this time I did not go to my uncle`s house.” (page 47).*

### **Control Our Body**

*"I was not a prostitute in the full sense of the word, so from time to time I said no. As a result, my price kept going up. A man cannot stand being rejected by a woman, because deep down inside he feels a rejection of himself. No one can stand this double rejection. And so, every time I said no, the man would insist. No matter how high I raised the price he could not stand being refused by a woman."* (page 97)

### **Finding Identity**

*"So, I left the house and went to my uncle. But my uncle told me that all husbands beat their wives, and my uncle's wife added that her husband often beat her."* (page 46)

### **Correct to Make Radical Choice**

*"I raised the knife and buried it deep in his neck, pulled it out of his neck and then thrust it deep into his chest, pulled it out of his chest and plunged it deep into his belly. I stuck the knife into almost every part of his body. I was astonished to find how easily my hand moved as I thrust the knife into his flesh and pulled it out almost without effort."* (page 104)

### **Financial and Emotional Freedom**

*"I quietly replied, 'The price of my body is much higher than the price that can be paid for it with a pay rise.'" (page 81)*

### **Rejection and Victimization**

*"My feet ran down the stairs, but her voice continued to echo in my ears until I reached the bottom, and walked out into the street. As I advanced over the pavement, I could still hear it coming from somewhere behind me. I turned round, but could see no one."* (page 42)

*"He wound his arms around me. I felt the familiar weight pressing down on my breast, but my body withdrew, turned in on itself away from me, like some passive, lifeless thing, refusing to surrender, undefeated."* (page 102)

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Struggle Against Oppression**

The fight against oppression is powerfully explored in the novel *Women at Point Zero*, especially in light of women's experiences in patriarchal societies. Firdaus, the main character, is a strong, self-reliant person who refuses to be constrained by social conventions and expectations that limit her independence and autonomy. This resistance

to societal constraints can be understood through Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) existentialist feminist theory, as articulated in *The Second Sex*, where she argues that women are often defined by their roles in relation to men and are denied their own agency and subjectivity. Firdaus challenges this by asserting her own identity and autonomy, resisting the objectification and subjugation imposed by patriarchal norms.

*“One day he hit me with his heavy stick until the blood ran from my nose and ears. So, I left, but this time I did not go to my uncle’s house.” (page 47).*

This sentence clearly shows the physical violence that Firdaus experienced, being brutally beaten with a shoe, leaving her face and body swollen and bruised. This kind of violence is an extreme and painful form of oppression, reflecting the injustice and cruelty that Firdaus faces. This experience highlights the seriousness of physical bullying in everyday life and the direct impact it has on an individual's physical and emotional well-being.

In response to the violence, Firdaus takes the brave step of leaving home and going to her uncle's house. This shows resistance to the oppression she is experiencing, although this step may be a last resort to seek refuge. Edward Said (1978) and Gayatri Spivak's (1988) postcolonial theories offer insight here, suggesting that individuals marginalized by both colonial and patriarchal systems often resist through acts of defiance, even if subtle. This action reflects Firdaus' desire to fight back and seek a safe place after experiencing violence, showing that the protagonist is not resigned to the oppressive situation and seeks a way out to avoid further atrocities. Firdaus, in this sense, becomes a symbol of resistance against multiple layers of oppression—patriarchy, colonialism, and classism—showing that her struggle is not just personal but also deeply political.

### **Control Our Body**

Firdaus is in a struggle to gain power over her own body and be able to wield it independently. Firdaus learned from an early age that her body was often controlled by others, starting with her father, then following to her husband, and the multiple men who took advantage of her. However, as Firdaus matures, she discovers that she can utilize her body as an instrument to win more power than other women who are constrained to traditional roles for women such as wives or mothers. This idea aligns with Michel Foucault's (1978) concept of biopower, where the control and regulation of bodies

become a site of power. Firdaus' decision to use her body as a means to gain autonomy is an act of reclaiming power in a society that seeks to control her.

A defining moment in Firdaus' life arrives when she decides to become a prostitute in order to seize control of her own life. Firdaus rapidly realized that she occupies a position of influence in servicing men by understanding that while she uses her body in a way that services the demands of men, she also determines the terms by which they will be serviced. This reflects Judith Butler's (1993) theory of performativity, where gendered identities and roles are not merely imposed but can be strategically enacted to subvert power structures. By becoming a prostitute, Firdaus not only redefines her role but also subverts the patriarchal expectations by controlling the terms of her engagement with men.

*“I was not a prostitute in the full sense of the word, so from time to time I said no. As a result, my price kept going up. A man cannot stand being rejected by a woman, because deep down inside he feels a rejection of himself. No one can stand this double rejection. And so, every time I said no, the man would insist. No matter how high I raised the price he could not stand being refused by a woman.” (page 97)*

In this quote, Firdaus uses the refusal strategy to gain control over the male customers who pay for her services. Men who purchase sexual services from women tend to view them as devalued objects. By refusing, Firdaus can assert her dignity and claim value that is higher than the sexual object. Firdaus understands that male whorehouse clients cannot handle refusal because it is a direct insult to their manhood. Therefore, she uses her refusal to dismantle the foundation of their ego, which means she gains some psychological control over the interaction. At the same time, she also uses refusal as a way to claim her own agency and dignity in a world where the value of a woman's self is determined by men. Katherine McKittrick (2006), in *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, argues that marginalized women often redefine spaces of subjugation as sites of resistance and empowerment. Firdaus' use of refusal can be seen as a way to reconfigure the power dynamics in her interactions with men, turning a space of potential exploitation into one of personal empowerment and control.

## Finding Identity

Firdaus' journey in understanding herself in a patriarchal and violent society is catalyzed by traumatic events and her associations with men who try to regulate or exploit her. Firdaus was raised in an extreme social setting of gender discrimination. From a young age, she was exposed to violent treatment, forced marriage, and eventually worked as a prostitute. These experiences reflect Judith Herman's (1992) concept of "complex trauma," which describes how repeated exposure to traumatic events, particularly in the context of relationships with others, profoundly impacts an individual's sense of self and their ability to engage with the world. Firdaus' traumatic experiences are pivotal in her development of a strong sense of self-awareness and resistance against the oppressive norms imposed on her.

Through these phases in Firdaus' life, she tirelessly searches for meaning and value in herself, apart from men's suppression. This aligns with Carol Gilligan's (1982) work on moral development, which argues that women often navigate their sense of identity and morality through relationships but must also find ways to assert their own voice and values in the face of societal expectations. Firdaus resists the roles that society attempts to place on her. She refuses to be a submissive wife, a subservient prostitute, or a resigned victim. Instead, Firdaus chooses freedom, even at the cost of death. Her resistance is also reflected in Sara Ahmed's (2017) theory of "living a feminist life," where Ahmed discusses how women navigate and resist the pressures of a patriarchal society by redefining what it means to live authentically and freely on their own terms.

*“So, I left the house and went to my uncle. But my uncle told me that all husbands beat their wives, and my uncle's wife added that her husband often beat her.”*  
(page 46)

This quote shows a critical moment in Firdaus' journey towards self-awareness. This violent event and the response of her family trigger Firdaus' awareness of the injustice in her life and her refusal to accept and normalize the violence in her life. This can be understood through bell hooks' (2000) concept of "radical resistance," which emphasizes the importance of refusing to internalize or accept oppressive norms as a necessary step towards liberation. Her response and this event create the foundation for Firdaus to move forward in her pursuit of an identity based on self-awareness, rejection of oppressive norms, and her pursuit of independence. This section highlights Firdaus'



early attempts to define herself outside of the roles prescribed by society and how this motivated her to pursue a life more aligned with her own values and desires.

### **Correct to Make Radical Choice**

Firdaus rises from a background of violence, exploitation and abuse by making a radical decision. History records that men have long used normative and moral motives to legitimize their position as superior individuals over women who are considered subordinate (Syah et al., 2021). Throughout her life, Firdaus has always felt she had no control over her own life. In a position where she was often an object, Firdaus was forced to get married against her will and was oppressed by others, especially by men who tried to exploit and control her throughout her life. For Firdaus, her radical act of killing a man and then choosing to die rather than live, raises the question of whether she did the right thing by making a radical choice to fight an unjust situation.

*"I raised the knife and buried it deep in his neck, pulled it out of his neck and then thrust it deep into his chest, pulled it out of his chest and plunged it deep into his belly. I stuck the knife into almost every part of his body. I was astonished to find how easily my hand moved as I thrust the knife into his flesh and pulled it out almost without effort." (page 104)*

This quote refers to the scene where Firdaus finally crosses the threshold and makes the radical decision to kill the pimp who has tried to control and manipulate her body and life. This symbolizes that Firdaus has reached a point of no return, where she cannot bear to be a victim of abuse any longer. Feminism known as emancipation and can be defined as awareness of oppression and extortion to women in society, at work, in family and awareness of women or men to change the condition (Wilany, 2017). Her act of killing the man represents her understanding of how long-coded violence and exploitation have left her ignorant of her self-worth, and that although what she did was extreme, it was her way of refusing to be further traumatized. She claims agency in a place where there are fewer and fewer places to find agency. Firdaus' actions exemplify the dilemma that exists for women in a patriarchy society. In the face of violent control over women, she uses violence as one of the ways a woman can achieve her freedom when it is not really available to her. Her actions mark a culmination, expressing despair that she feels she is personally an agent and that structures are not equipped to empower or protect women.

## **Financial and Emotional Freedom**

Financial independence is something that Firdaus wants, as she wants to earn an income to be free from male oppression and the patriarchy system. The meaning of financial independence mentions Firdaus' freedom in relation to prostitution and exploitation, as it rejects financial dependence on men and reduces the excessive financial dependence that reduces her autonomy. Patriarchal culture positions men as strong and tends to have the freedom to do anything to women (Nurnaningsih, 2023). At the beginning of the novel as a prostitute, Firdaus is dependent on men to finance her life, and this brings resistance to the oppression in her life and her independence. Firdaus contacts someone early in the novel, a household helper, to offer her non-sexual services as wage labor, but in a male-dominated village this stereotypes her, her lack of general education and her lack of job security. For Firdaus, she found a real opportunity to be financially independent through her work as a commercial sex worker. By venturing into the body business opportunity, Firdaus was able to provide an opportunity to achieve financial independence.

*“I quietly replied, ‘The price of my body is much higher than the price that can be paid for it with a pay rise.’” (page 81)*

This quote shows how self-esteem and financial independence are very important in one's life. Therefore, Financial Freedom is not just about money, but also about how much self-respect one has. Meanwhile, emotional freedom has to do with letting go of the shackles of suffering and a painful past. An abused and exploited woman, Firdaus was a woman who bore the shame with little self-blame. Human beings, whether male or female, have no essence, so there is no obligation for women to incarnate what men expect (Syah et al., 2021). However, later, after Firdaus understood her own worth and capabilities, she was able to break free from the emotional baggage of her past and learn to love herself. It was a process of reflection, introspection and story-sharing where we both told stories of the trauma Firdaus had faced. It was this process that led Firdaus to the emotional freedom she desired.

## **Rejection and Victimization**

Rejection and victimization are part of the life story of Firdaus. Firdaus experiences rejection in the form of refusal of forced marriage, abandonment by attempts to save herself from a life of prostitution and also sexual harassment. Her rejection is an attempt to provide educational control over her life. On the contrary, Firdaus is also a victim of

domestic violence, used by pimps to conduct prostitution business transactions, and also deceived by traffickers. Firdaus's suffering shows her struggle to be free and independent, but it also shows how she is able to overcome her weaknesses in trying to control her life. Overall, Patriarchy idea prevailing in all social areas and rejecting patriarchy is the key step to the liberation of the female (Guo, 2018).

*"My feet ran down the stairs, but her voice continued to echo in my ears until I reached the bottom, and walked out into the street. As I advanced over the pavement, I could still hear it coming from somewhere behind me. I turned round, but could see no one." (page 42)*

This quote highlights Firdaus' rejection of forced marriage, both by literally running away and in abstract aesthetic imagery as a specter from her past. Firdaus runs, seeking freedom on the streets, her body resisting the imposed attachments of others that would be both oppressive and abusive. Putra (2023) said, the practice of forced matchmaking or arranged marriages, whether initiated by parents or any other individuals, is deemed inappropriate, irrational, and irrelevant. She struggles against conservative social norms that demand her to do nothing but break free from them. The resounding voice reminds her of the hold that social norms have on Firdaus' life. Firdaus is a brave person and wants to live on her own terms, hence she resists the pressure shown by society and also runs away which shows a lot of contradiction. This is a demonstration of Firdaus' struggle against the injustices perpetrated by society and the parts of society that seek to target her freedom in finding an autonomous trajectory.

*"He wound his arms around me. I felt the familiar weight pressing down on my breast, but my body withdrew, turned in on itself away from me, like some passive, lifeless thing, refusing to surrender, undefeated." (page 102)*

The quote refers to how Firdaus was slandered by her pimp. In the quote, Firdaus is dehumanized by her pimp who controls her both physically and mentally in order to benefit from her. Victims of sexual violence must experience many impacts, for example, trauma, psychological disorders, depression, and stress (Sari & Sufanti, 2023). The repetition of physical and sexual violence encapsulates the pimp's behavior which forms a routine to ensure Firdaus' submission. Physically, her body also responds with passive resistance, while emotionally and mentally, Firdaus defends herself by disengaging from the incident. Despite the fact that he is in a very helpless position, Firdaus explains to a

pimp that despite her wholehearted attempts to drag her into humiliation, she will never be able to suppress or kill that part of herself and all the elements that torment her true self.

## CONCLUSION

Nawal El Saadawi's Novel *Women at Point Zero* portrayed the concept of women's power have within a patriarchy society through Firdaus' struggle against multiple forms of oppression and violence. Firdaus is the main character, who is engaged in the struggle with herself to master both her own body and life against the background of a social structure full of patriarchy constraints. Firdaus rejects oppressive social norms and sexual exploitation, showing that women's power is manifested not only in the capability to survive an oppressive situation but also by making strong decisions. In this case Firdaus becoming a sex worker, in order to have control over her life. The experience of Firdaus symbolizes that patriarchy systems are not only looting women of their independence and dignity but also leading them to seek freedom and identity much outside of the norms created by society. That shows empowerment for a woman can come from the darkest most unjust situations is tested time and again by violence and oppression, but Firdaus' power remains unscathed.

Having conduct this study, the researcher would like to give some suggestion related to the result of this study. Readers are invited to reflect on the power and resilience of Firdaus as a symbol of resistance against oppressive social norms, and to actively support women's empowerment in real life. Researchers are expected to further explore how individual experiences of oppression and struggle can provide a deeper understanding of power dynamics and gender identity, and how similar research can be used to raise awareness and social change. In the context of education, it is important to include the study of women's power and struggles against patriarchy in the curriculum, so that students can understand and appreciate individual efforts in achieving autonomy and dignity amidst oppressive systems.

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