

From Firdaus to Cameroon: Patriarchal Abandonment, Gendered Violence, and Women's Survival in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*

Kedze Marcevinus Akah

The University of Bamenda

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a postcolonial feminist reading of Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, examining the interconnected experiences of patriarchal abandonment, gendered violence, economic vulnerability, cultural expectation, and women's survival. Although existing scholarship has examined the novel through patriarchy, sexual violence, prostitution, trauma, and female resistance, this study brings these concerns into a sustained examination of what it terms patriarchal abandonment: a condition in which women remain bound by familial, marital, cultural, and gendered expectations while the structures that should provide protection, material support, and social responsibility fail them. The reading draws on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concerns with representation and the subaltern, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of the homogenisation of Third World women, and African feminist thought, particularly Obioma Nnaemeka's emphasis on negotiation and context. These perspectives make it possible to read *Firdaus* neither as a universal figure of female victimhood nor as a simple emblem of liberation, but as a woman negotiating historically and culturally specific forms of power, violence, dependence, and survival. The article examines the novel's representations of family responsibility, marriage, male violence, economic dependence, social respectability, and women's obligation to endure hardship, and places these concerns in critical dialogue with contemporary Cameroon. The comparison does not collapse the Egyptian and Cameroonian contexts into one experience; rather, it considers how the novel provides a literary framework for thinking about femicide, gendered maltreatment, economic hardship, male non-provision, family and community responsibility, and women's survival in Cameroon. The article argues that *Woman at Point Zero* reveals a contradiction at the heart of gendered social relations: women can be required to sustain family, marriage, morality, and social respectability while being denied the protection, provision, and justice that such responsibilities presuppose. *Firdaus*'s survival therefore cannot be reduced to a straightforward movement from oppression to liberation; it emerges from her continuous negotiation with structures that constrain her, abandon her, and ultimately compel her to create her own means of survival.

Keywords: Patriarchal Abandonment; Gendered Violence; Women's Survival; Postcolonial Feminism; African Feminism.

INTRODUCTION

Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* centres on Firdaus, an Egyptian woman awaiting execution after killing a man. Through her account, the novel traces childhood deprivation, sexual violation, abusive marriage, economic dependence, exploitation, prostitution, and her struggle for self-determination. Her story does not move simply from victimhood to liberation; rather, it reveals changing relationships between gender, power, material survival, and social expectation, making the novel particularly productive for a postcolonial feminist reading. A central contradiction in Firdaus's experience is that the structures defining what a woman should be, whom she should obey, and what responsibilities she should assume repeatedly fail to provide the protection, economic security, dignity, and justice that such expectations presuppose. Family, marriage, religion, work, and the wider social order thus become interconnected sites of authority and abandonment. This article develops patriarchal abandonment as an analytical concept for describing a

condition in which women remain subject to familial, marital, cultural, and gendered expectations while the structures imposing those expectations fail to provide corresponding protection, provision, care, or accountability. The concept brings together dimensions often treated separately in readings of the novel: gendered violence, economic vulnerability, family responsibility, male non-provision, cultural expectations, abandonment, and women's survival. Firdaus is therefore not only controlled; she is repeatedly left to negotiate the consequences of that control.

Existing scholarship has established the importance of gendered power in *Woman at Point Zero*. Istifadah and Wahyu Indah Mala Rohmana identify physical, verbal, and sexual abuse, marginalisation, and exploitation as forms of gender injustice (383). Ibitoye-Ayeni and Ogunmodede examine patriarchal sexual violence and trauma, while Saddik Gohar considers marginalisation, voice, and female agency through subalternity. Building on these studies, this article shifts attention toward the relationship between domination and failed responsibility. Firdaus is expected to endure and fulfil obligations to others while her own claims to protection and material security remain uncertain. Her agency consequently develops within, rather than outside, conditions of dependency, violence, economic necessity, and limited alternatives. A postcolonial feminist framework allows these conditions to be examined without reducing Firdaus to a universal representation of the "Third World woman." Chandra Talpade Mohanty calls attention to the historical and cultural specificity of women's experiences and challenges the homogenisation of women from the global South (337). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak similarly complicates questions of representation by asking, "Can the subaltern speak? And can the subaltern (as woman) speak?" (294). Her concern with the conditions through which marginalised women become heard is particularly relevant to Firdaus, whose identity is repeatedly defined by others even as her narrative challenges those definitions. Obioma Nnaemeka's *Nego-Feminism* further foregrounds negotiation and context, defining it as "the feminism of negotiation" (358). Together, these perspectives allow Firdaus's choices to be understood as forms of agency shaped by particular historical, cultural, and material conditions rather than as either simple submission or complete liberation.

This framework also requires caution in approaching African cultural values. The study neither treats African culture as inherently oppressive nor romanticises family and community as naturally protective. Such structures may provide care, belonging, mediation, economic assistance, and protection, but they may also impose unequal expectations concerning marriage, obedience, motherhood, respectability, and family honour. The critical question is how particular relationships and responsibilities operate in particular circumstances, especially when the protection attached to those responsibilities fails. This question gives the study a contemporary Cameroonian dimension. Gender-based violence, economic vulnerability, intimate-partner violence, and femicide remain significant concerns in Cameroon, while gaps in legal and institutional protection continue to affect women's security. These realities do not make Cameroon an equivalent of Firdaus's Egypt. Rather, they provide a different context in which questions raised by the novel—gendered violence, economic hardship, male non-provision, family responsibility, social expectations, and women's survival—can be examined. Economic conditions are especially important because dependence may restrict a woman's ability to leave violence, while unreliable male provision or family support can leave women responsible for surviving circumstances they did not create. The article therefore argues that *Woman at Point Zero* can be read not only as a narrative of patriarchal oppression but also as a narrative of patriarchal abandonment: women are subjected to structures of authority while being denied adequate protection, provision, and accountability within those same structures. A dialogue with contemporary Cameroon extends this reading without collapsing different histories and cultures into one experience. The study asks how the novel represents patriarchal authority and women's abandonment, how violence, economic vulnerability, cultural expectations, and family responsibility shape Firdaus's survival, and what this literary dialogue reveals about women negotiating unequal social structures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical scholarship on Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* has examined women's subordination, sexual violence, economic vulnerability, marginalisation, trauma, agency, and resistance. While these approaches illuminate different aspects of Firdaus's experience, they leave room for a more specific

question: what happens when structures that impose obligations on women fail to provide the protection, material support, and responsibility those obligations presuppose? This study addresses that question through the concept of patriarchal abandonment. In “Patriarchal Hegemony in the Novel ‘Woman at Point Zero’ by Nawal El Saadawi,” Istifadah and Wahyu Indah Mala Rohmana identify “physical, verbal, sexual abuse, marginalization, and exploitation of women” as major forms of gender injustice (383). Their study establishes the multidimensional nature of Firdaus’s oppression, showing that patriarchal power operates through physical, social, and economic relations. The present study builds on this argument by examining what happens when structures that dominate women also fail to assume responsibility for their welfare. Patriarchal abandonment is therefore treated not as a replacement for patriarchal hegemony but as a condition produced within it.

Naomi Kehinde Ibitoye-Ayeni and Olabisi Bukola Ogunmodede, in “Patriarchy-induced Sexual Violence and Trauma in Nawal Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero*,” focus on domestic violence, sexual exploitation, and their traumatic consequences. Their emphasis is important because Firdaus’s later choices are shaped by the accumulation of violence across different stages of her life. While their approach highlights trauma as a consequence of patriarchal violence, this study asks why the social structures surrounding Firdaus repeatedly fail to prevent, interrupt, or take responsibility for that violence. The focus consequently shifts from the effects of violence alone to the conditions of neglect and abandonment that allow it to persist. In “Empowering the Subaltern in *Woman at Point Zero*,” Saddik Gohar moves attention toward voice and agency, arguing that El Saadawi seeks to “centralize the marginalized and give a voice as well as an agency to the voiceless” (174). This perspective is significant because Firdaus is not merely a passive victim. She interprets her experiences, makes economic decisions, rejects relationships that threaten her autonomy, and ultimately acts against a man whose violence she can no longer accept. The present study retains this emphasis on agency while asking how that agency develops within conditions of neglect, exploitation, violence, and economic vulnerability. Survival, therefore, does not erase oppression; it becomes one of the circumstances through which Firdaus exercises agency.

Janet A. Dede’s “Women and Patriarchy: A Case Study of Firdaus in the Works of Nawal El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero*” likewise situates Firdaus within the struggle between women and patriarchal authority. Her approach reinforces the importance of examining the social structures that shape Firdaus’s choices rather than treating her experiences as merely individual. The present study extends this structural concern by distinguishing between being controlled and being controlled while abandoned. Firdaus is expected to fulfil responsibilities within family and marriage while receiving inadequate protection and material support from those same arrangements. This contradiction is central to the concept of patriarchal abandonment.

The economic dimension is addressed by Elizabeth S. Anker in “Women’s Rights and the Lure of Self-Determination in Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero*,” which considers women’s rights, self-determination, and the tension between individual autonomy and wider social structures. This perspective is particularly relevant because Firdaus’s relationship with men changes as she acquires greater control over her income and material circumstances. Yet economic independence does not remove her exposure to gendered power. The present study connects this tension to patriarchal abandonment: women may be expected to depend on male provision and fulfil socially assigned responsibilities while receiving unreliable material support. Economic vulnerability thus becomes part of the larger condition through which Firdaus is forced to negotiate survival. Taken together, these studies establish important lines of interpretation—patriarchal hegemony, violence and trauma, subaltern agency, women’s struggle against patriarchal authority, and economic self-determination. The present study brings these strands into a more focused relationship by examining patriarchal abandonment as the condition in which women remain subject to gendered, familial, and social obligations while protection, provision, and accountability remain inadequate. This approach allows Firdaus’s violence, economic vulnerability, and agency to be read not as isolated experiences but as interconnected dimensions of her struggle to survive.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in postcolonial feminist theory, supplemented by African feminist thought on negotiation, context, and women's agency. This framework is appropriate because *Woman at Point Zero* presents women's experiences through interconnected familial, religious, cultural, economic, and gendered structures. Firdaus should therefore not be treated as a universal representation of an abstract "oppressed woman." Her experiences emerge from particular historical and cultural circumstances. Postcolonial feminism enables the study to examine gendered power while remaining attentive to representation, cultural specificity, material conditions, and women's agency. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" provides the framework's concern with voice and representation. Spivak asks, "Can the subaltern speak? And can the subaltern (as woman) speak?" (294), directing attention to the structures that determine whose experiences become recognised as knowledge. Firdaus is important in this regard because she narrates and interprets her own experiences rather than appearing only as an object of suffering. Yet her voice is not treated as entirely outside mediation. Spivak's observation that "one never encounters the testimony of the women's voice-consciousness" (297) is relevant to the novel's narrative structure, in which Firdaus's story reaches the reader through layers of narration. Her testimony is consequently read as a site where a marginalised woman asserts meaning while negotiating structures that have historically denied her authority.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" provides a necessary caution against treating women of the global South as a homogeneous category. Mohanty challenges the production of the "'third world woman' as a singular monolithic subject" (333). This is particularly important for the article's dialogue between Firdaus's Egypt and contemporary Cameroon. The comparison does not assume that Egyptian and Cameroonian women share identical histories, cultures, or forms of oppression. Instead, it examines related questions—gendered violence, family and marital expectations, economic responsibility, social conduct, and institutional protection—while preserving contextual differences. Mohanty therefore helps the study compare experiences without turning difference into sameness. Obioma Nnaemeka's African feminist concept of Nego-Feminism further strengthens this contextual approach. In "Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way," she defines it as "the feminism of negotiation" (358). This perspective recognises negotiation, compromise, accommodation, resistance, and strategic repositioning as possible forms of women's agency. It does not imply that women accept oppression; rather, it recognises that choices are often made within social relationships and structures that cannot easily be abandoned. This is useful for understanding Firdaus, whose movement through family, marriage, employment, and economic independence does not follow a simple transition from submission to liberation. Her responses develop through accumulated experience and changing material circumstances.

Nnaemeka's emphasis on context also prevents this study from treating African cultural values as inherently oppressive. Family, kinship, marriage, motherhood, community, and male responsibility may provide care, belonging, mediation, and material support. The problem arises when obligations become unequal: women may continue to be expected to obey, endure, care, and contribute while the structures imposing these expectations fail to provide corresponding protection and accountability. This contradiction constitutes the study's central concept of patriarchal abandonment. Patriarchal abandonment is defined here as a condition in which women remain subject to familial, marital, cultural, and gendered expectations while the structures associated with those expectations fail to provide adequate protection, material support, recognition, or accountability. It is related to patriarchal oppression but is not identical to it. Oppression concerns the exercise of power that subordinates women; abandonment concerns the failure of structures that impose obligations upon women to assume corresponding responsibility for their welfare. The distinction can be understood through the relationship between protection and control. A husband, father, guardian, or male authority may retain the power to demand obedience while failing to provide the protection or material security associated with that role. A woman may consequently be expected to preserve a marriage or family while receiving little protection from violence or economic hardship.

The concept therefore provides an analytical movement from protection to abandonment, abandonment to survival, and survival to resistance. This is not a universal or linear sequence; it is a way of tracing how unequal responsibilities can shape women's responses. Firdaus repeatedly encounters individuals and institutions that exercise authority over her without accepting the responsibilities that authority should entail. Her eventual determination to control her own life develops partly from these failures. Economic vulnerability is central to this process. Material dependence can limit a woman's ability to leave violence or secure alternative support, while economic independence does not necessarily remove gendered power. Firdaus's experience demonstrates both dimensions: money can increase her control over her circumstances, yet it cannot by itself eliminate social attitudes and relationships that expose her to exploitation. Similarly, gendered violence and femicide are examined not only as individual acts but also in relation to conditions that may enable violence to be tolerated, concealed, or repeated, including marital entitlement, expectations of obedience, economic dependence, and pressure to endure hardship. This does not shift responsibility away from perpetrators or suggest that culture alone produces violence. Postcolonial feminism thus functions in this study as a method of contextual analysis, rather than a ready-made explanation of Firdaus's life. Spivak foregrounds voice and representation; Mohanty guards against homogenising women of the global South; and Nnaemeka emphasises negotiation, context, and African women's agency. Together, these perspectives allow Firdaus to be read neither as a universal victim nor as a simple symbol of emancipation. They instead illuminate the contradiction at the centre of patriarchal abandonment: women may be required to carry familial, marital, economic, and social responsibilities while the structures around them fail to provide the protection and material security those responsibilities imply. This contradiction provides the conceptual basis for the article's later dialogue with contemporary Cameroon.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative textual approach grounded in postcolonial feminist literary criticism. Its primary text is Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, examined through close reading of passages concerning family, marriage, economic dependence, gendered violence, cultural expectation, and women's survival. The novel is treated as a literary construction rather than as direct sociological evidence about Egyptian women. Attention is therefore given to narrative voice, characterisation, dialogue, social relationships, and the movement between dependence and self-determination. The analysis focuses particularly on situations in which individuals or social structures exercise authority over Firdaus while failing to provide the protection, material security, or responsibility associated with that authority. These moments are examined through the concept of patriarchal abandonment. The study also considers how Firdaus negotiates such conditions through economic decisions, withdrawal from harmful relationships, and other attempts to secure her survival. Her actions are interpreted within their specific circumstances rather than classified automatically as either submission or resistance.

The study further uses comparative contextualisation to place the novel in dialogue with contemporary Cameroon. The comparison is selective and follows issues emerging from the literary analysis: gendered violence, femicide, economic vulnerability, male non-provision, family responsibility, cultural expectations, and women's survival. It does not treat Egypt and Cameroon as identical contexts or present Firdaus as representative of Cameroonian women. Instead, contemporary Cameroon provides a distinct context in which related questions can be examined. Family and community structures are approached as potentially both protective and restrictive: they may provide care, mediation, economic assistance, and belonging, but expectations concerning marriage, obedience, motherhood, and family honour may also constrain women's choices. The Cameroonian material is therefore used to illuminate, not replace, the literary analysis. Contemporary evidence concerning gender-based violence, economic vulnerability, and women's ability to leave harmful relationships is read alongside the novel's representation of similar but contextually different pressures. The study consequently moves from text to concept, and from concept to contextual comparison: *Woman at Point Zero* provides the primary literary evidence; postcolonial and African feminist theories guide interpretation; and Cameroon provides a contemporary context through which the analytical usefulness of patriarchal abandonment can be considered. This method preserves the specificity of Firdaus's Egyptian experience while examining the broader relationship between gendered expectations, social responsibility, abandonment, violence, and women's survival.

Patriarchal Abandonment in Woman at Point Zero

Firdaus's experience of patriarchal abandonment begins within the family, where the structures expected to provide care and protection instead become some of the earliest sources of her vulnerability. El Saadawi does not introduce Firdaus as a woman who simply enters an already oppressive adult world. Her understanding of power is formed during childhood through repeated encounters with male authority, unequal responsibility, and the absence of reliable protection. The family therefore becomes the first space in which the contradiction between protection and abandonment emerges. Firdaus's recollections of childhood reveal that the authority exercised by men within the household does not necessarily correspond to care. Her father occupies the position of head of the family, yet Firdaus remembers deprivation, fear, and the unequal treatment of children. More significantly, the novel connects the authority of the father to a wider social arrangement in which the male occupies a privileged position while the female child learns to accommodate herself to circumstances determined by others. Firdaus consequently grows up learning not only that men possess authority but also that her own needs can remain secondary to that authority.

The significance of this childhood experience becomes clearer when Firdaus later reflects on the men she encounters throughout her life. She states: "However, every single man I did get to know filled me with but one desire: to lift my hand and bring it smashing down on his face." (10) The intensity of this statement cannot be understood as an isolated expression of hatred toward men. It is the product of accumulated experience. By the time Firdaus makes this observation, male authority has become associated in her consciousness with humiliation, exploitation, and the denial of her humanity. The word "every" is particularly important because it suggests a pattern rather than a single traumatic encounter. Firdaus does not identify one exceptional man as the source of her suffering; she perceives repeated similarities among the men who have occupied different positions in her life. At the same time, the statement should not be read as a simple rejection of all men or as evidence that Firdaus's character is driven solely by hatred. It records a psychological response to a social history. Men have appeared to her as fathers, relatives, husbands, employers, clients, and controllers, but the change in social role does not always produce a corresponding change in the power relation. The continuity is what matters. Firdaus repeatedly encounters men who can determine the conditions of her existence while she is expected to accommodate herself to those decisions.

Her relationship with her uncle provides one of the earliest and most disturbing examples. The uncle initially appears as someone who should assume responsibility for a female relative who has lost the protection of her immediate family. Instead, the relationship becomes sexually exploitative. This episode is central to patriarchal abandonment because it demonstrates the collapse of a culturally expected protective relationship. The man who occupies the position of guardian is simultaneously the person from whom Firdaus requires protection and the person who violates that trust. The significance of the episode extends beyond the uncle as an individual. Firdaus is placed in a situation where the social position of the male relative gives him authority over her while her dependence makes resistance difficult. The language of kinship therefore becomes deeply ambivalent. Family is supposed to offer security, but kinship alone does not guarantee ethical responsibility. El Saadawi exposes the danger that arises when familial authority is maintained without the protective obligations that should accompany it. This contradiction follows Firdaus into marriage. Marriage is conventionally presented as a structure through which a woman enters a household in which the husband assumes responsibility for her material and social welfare. Firdaus's marriage to Sheikh Mahmoud, however, reveals a profound gap between marital authority and marital responsibility. Mahmoud possesses the authority expected of a husband, but his treatment of Firdaus demonstrates that authority can become detached from protection.

El Saadawi writes: "A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband." (70) The sentence is important because it shifts the problem from the husband's individual behaviour to the social meaning attached to the wife's response. Firdaus is not simply expected to live with a violent husband; she is confronted with an ideal of womanhood according to which complaint itself can be interpreted as a failure of virtue. Female endurance becomes morally desirable, while male violence risks being normalized. This is one of the clearest points at which patriarchal abandonment operates. Firdaus is given a socially recognized role—that of wife—but the responsibilities attached to that role are distributed unequally. She is expected to

preserve the marriage, obey her husband, and endure hardship, while the husband is not held to an equivalent expectation of protecting her from violence. The institution therefore demands responsibility from the woman while failing to impose sufficient responsibility upon the person who possesses greater authority.

The physical violence that follows makes this contradiction impossible to ignore. Firdaus recalls: “One day he hit me with his heavy stick until the blood ran from my nose and ears.” (72) The brutality of the act contrasts sharply with the moral language surrounding the marriage. The word “heavy” emphasizes the force of the attack, while the reference to blood makes the consequences of violence physically visible. Yet the novel's deeper concern is what happens after the violence. Firdaus seeks assistance, but the response she receives does not simply condemn the husband. Instead, the violence is explained and normalized within the social understanding of marriage. Her uncle's response is particularly revealing because he does not occupy the position of a stranger. As a member of her family, he might be expected to intervene on behalf of a woman subjected to serious abuse. His response instead reinforces the idea that violence is part of married life. The family therefore fails to function as a corrective to marital violence. The institution of marriage and the institution of family converge around the demand that Firdaus endure. This convergence is central to the argument of patriarchal abandonment. The problem is not that Firdaus exists outside social structures. On the contrary, she is surrounded by structures—family, kinship, marriage, religion, and community expectations. What fails is the protective function that should accompany them. She is never completely without social ties; she is without dependable protection within those ties.

Her decision to leave Mahmoud consequently carries a significance greater than the ending of an unhappy marriage. It represents an attempt to escape a social arrangement in which endurance has been mistaken for virtue. Firdaus discovers that remaining within the structure does not guarantee safety. Leaving becomes necessary because the institution that should protect her has become one of the conditions of her suffering. Yet her departure does not immediately produce freedom. This is another important feature of the novel. Firdaus moves from one structure of dependence into another. Her encounter with Bayoumi initially appears different because he offers assistance when she is vulnerable. His house provides temporary shelter, suggesting the possibility that a man might use his power to protect rather than exploit her. That possibility soon collapses. The apparent protector becomes another source of domination. This transition is significant because it prevents the novel from presenting patriarchal abandonment as something confined to marriage. Firdaus's vulnerability follows her beyond the marital household. A woman who has escaped one abusive relationship can remain exposed because she lacks secure social and economic alternatives. Assistance offered by men may therefore carry its own conditions. Protection becomes indistinguishable from control when the woman has no meaningful power to refuse the terms upon which it is offered.

Firdaus's experience with Bayoumi also complicates any easy distinction between “good” and “bad” social structures. What appears initially as rescue can become another form of captivity. El Saadawi thereby shows that vulnerability is produced not only by openly violent men but also by unequal circumstances in which one person possesses the resources necessary to determine another person's choices. The pattern continues through Firdaus's encounters with prostitution. At this point, it would be misleading to treat prostitution simply as the cause of her abandonment. In the novel, it becomes partly a response to an earlier condition of abandonment. Firdaus enters a world where she can obtain money from men because the socially respectable structures available to her have failed to provide stable protection. Her movement into prostitution therefore needs to be understood within the sequence of events that precedes it. This does not make prostitution liberating in itself. Rather, it demonstrates the restricted nature of Firdaus's choices. She repeatedly chooses among circumstances that are already unequal. Her agency develops under pressure. She learns how to negotiate, refuse, earn, and eventually resist, but these abilities are acquired because conventional forms of protection have proved unreliable.

The novel thus presents a crucial contradiction between women's social obligations and the protection they receive in return. Firdaus is repeatedly expected to behave as a good daughter, obedient niece, virtuous wife, respectable woman, and socially acceptable female subject. Yet the men and institutions responsible for

defining these expectations do not consistently provide the care, security, or accountability that would make such expectations reciprocal.

This contradiction gives patriarchal abandonment its particular meaning in Firdaus's story. Patriarchal power does not disappear when protection fails. It remains. Firdaus is still expected to obey even when she is unsafe, to endure even when she is abused, and to preserve social expectations even when those expectations offer her little protection. What disappears is the reciprocal responsibility that should accompany authority. The result is a woman who is progressively pushed toward self-reliance. Firdaus does not begin with a fully formed desire to reject every social institution. Her resistance develops through repeated disappointments. Family fails to protect her; marriage fails to protect her; male assistance becomes another form of control; and social morality repeatedly places the burden of endurance upon her. Her later determination to control her own life therefore emerges from accumulated experience rather than abstract rebellion.

Read in this way, *Woman at Point Zero* presents abandonment as a process. Firdaus is not abandoned at one identifiable moment. She encounters abandonment repeatedly, in different forms and within different relationships. The structures change, but the underlying contradiction remains: she is expected to live according to obligations defined by others while those others are not consistently held responsible for her safety and wellbeing. This pattern also prepares the ground for understanding her later violence and economic struggles. Her resistance does not emerge suddenly at the end of the narrative. It develops through a gradual recognition that the institutions around her cannot be assumed to protect her simply because they claim authority over her life. Firdaus's eventual resistance is therefore rooted in a painful lesson: when protection is withdrawn but obedience is still demanded, survival may require the woman to become her own source of protection. Patriarchal abandonment in *Woman at Point Zero* is consequently not merely another name for oppression. Oppression explains the control exercised over Firdaus; abandonment explains the failure of responsibility that accompanies that control. The distinction is important because it reveals why Firdaus's suffering persists even when she moves between different social environments. She is controlled by structures that continue to make claims upon her, yet she is repeatedly left to manage the consequences of that control herself. Her journey from dependence toward resistance begins in this contradiction between the authority exercised over her and the protection denied to her.

Gendered Violence and the Failure of Protection

Gendered violence in *Woman at Point Zero* is presented not as a series of isolated acts committed by individual men but as a recurring experience through which Firdaus learns the limits of the protection promised by family, marriage, and male authority. The novel moves from physical assault to sexual violence, verbal humiliation, confinement, and psychological detachment. What makes these forms of violence particularly significant is that they repeatedly occur within relationships in which Firdaus should reasonably expect some degree of security. The violence within Firdaus's marriage is especially revealing because it is accompanied by an ideology of female endurance. After describing her husband's treatment of her, Firdaus recalls:

On one occasion, he hit me all over with his shoe. My face and body became swollen and bruised ...

my uncle told me that all husbands beat their wives, and my uncle's wife added that her husband often beat her. (70)

The passage moves from the physical body to the social explanation of violence. Firdaus's swollen and bruised body provides visible evidence of abuse, yet the response of the people around her works in the opposite direction: instead of treating the violence as an exceptional violation requiring intervention, they present it as something associated with marriage. Her uncle's statement is particularly important because it transforms an individual act of violence into a supposedly ordinary feature of married life. The aunt's confirmation further reinforces the normalization of suffering by presenting her own experience as evidence that Firdaus should expect the same treatment. The repetition of violence across marriages is therefore significant. The problem is not simply that Mahmoud is violent; it is that the surrounding social environment possesses a language through which his violence can be absorbed into the institution of marriage. Firdaus is

consequently denied the protection that kinship might ordinarily provide. Her relatives do not challenge the husband's authority. Instead, they help make his conduct appear socially intelligible.

The next assault intensifies this failure of protection. Firdaus states: "One day he hit me with his heavy stick until the blood ran from my nose and ears." (72)

The movement from bruising to bleeding marks an escalation in bodily violence. The image of blood makes the consequences of the husband's authority impossible to treat as merely disciplinary. Yet the significance of the passage extends beyond the brutality of the act. Firdaus leaves the house after this attack, and her departure demonstrates that the marital relationship has ceased to function as a place of safety. The woman who is expected to remain within marriage for the sake of social respectability must eventually leave precisely because remaining there threatens her physical existence. This is where gendered violence intersects with patriarchal abandonment. The novel shows a structure that continues to recognize the husband's authority even when his conduct violates the woman's bodily security. The institution does not disappear when protection fails; its expectations remain. Firdaus is still a wife, still expected to conform to the role of a wife, but the corresponding obligation of the husband to ensure her safety has effectively collapsed.

The violence she encounters after leaving Mahmoud demonstrates that escape from marriage does not automatically produce safety. Firdaus meets Bayoumi, who initially appears to offer the protection that her previous relationships denied her. His assistance, however, gradually becomes another mechanism of control. When Firdaus expresses her desire to work and leave his house, his response is physical aggression. He slaps her, strikes her, and eventually confines her. The episode is important because it exposes the instability of protection when it is dependent entirely upon the goodwill of a man who possesses greater power. The sexual violence that follows is narrated through a striking representation of bodily detachment. Firdaus recalls: "I kept my eyes closed and abandoned my body. It lay there under him without movement, emptied of all desire, pleasure, or even pain, feeling nothing." (80)

The phrase "abandoned my body" is central to the representation of trauma. Firdaus does not describe herself as actively participating in the encounter. Instead, consciousness appears to separate itself from the body undergoing violence. The body becomes something that can be left behind psychologically because remaining fully conscious of what is happening would intensify the experience of violation. The subsequent description of the body as emptied of sensation deepens this effect. Desire, pleasure, and pain are all absent. This is significant because the absence of pain does not indicate that the violence is harmless. Rather, the inability to feel becomes a sign of the extremity of the experience. El Saadawi thus represents sexual violence not only through the physical act itself but through its effect on Firdaus's relationship with her own body.

The episode also challenges the assumption that sexual violence requires a stranger as perpetrator. Firdaus is assaulted within a space in which she has sought refuge. The person who initially appears to provide shelter becomes part of the violence, and other men are subsequently permitted access to her. The boundary between refuge and captivity therefore disappears. Her dependence on Bayoumi gives him the opportunity to transform assistance into domination. Verbal violence accompanies this physical and sexual violence. Firdaus is repeatedly reduced through insults that attack her social identity and dignity. In one confrontation, she is called "a streetwalker" and "a low woman" (79). Such language is not incidental. It attempts to define Firdaus according to the social position assigned to her by men. The insult does not merely describe her; it is used to establish a hierarchy in which the man claims the authority to determine her worth. This becomes particularly significant when Firdaus attempts to exercise an ordinary form of independence: the desire to work. Her demand to find employment challenges Bayoumi's control over her movement and future. His response demonstrates how quickly a woman's attempt to become economically independent can be interpreted as disobedience by a man accustomed to controlling her circumstances. The slap therefore carries a meaning beyond physical pain. It is an attempt to restore a hierarchy that Firdaus's desire for employment threatens.

The novel repeatedly connects such violence with the language used to justify women's subordination. Firdaus is expected to obey as a wife, remain grateful when a man provides shelter, and accept the terms established by men. When she challenges these expectations, violence becomes a means of enforcing them. Gendered violence consequently functions not only as punishment but also as a mechanism for maintaining social relations in which male authority remains unquestioned. Yet Firdaus is not represented as permanently passive within these relations. Her response changes as she begins to understand the pattern connecting her experiences. The realization that different men can occupy different social positions while reproducing similar forms of domination allows her to recognize that the problem exceeds any single relationship. Her later choices are therefore informed by accumulated knowledge of how male power operates. This development is particularly important from a postcolonial feminist perspective. A reading that simply labels Firdaus an oppressed Third World woman risks reducing the complexity of her experience. Her vulnerability is historically and socially specific, and her responses are equally specific. She is not merely acted upon; she observes, remembers, evaluates, negotiates, and eventually refuses. Her violence toward Marzouk at the end of the narrative must therefore be read in relation to the accumulated violence that has preceded it.

The progression from Mahmoud to Bayoumi and then to other male figures reveals a disturbing continuity. Firdaus changes location, relationship, and social position, but male control continues to reappear in different forms. Marriage produces physical violence; supposed protection produces sexual violence and confinement; social interaction produces verbal degradation. The forms differ, but the underlying problem remains the unequal distribution of power. This is why the novel's representation of gendered violence cannot be reduced to the category of "wife beating" or "sexual abuse." El Saadawi constructs a broader system in which the female body becomes a site upon which authority is repeatedly asserted. The body is beaten, confined, touched, insulted, and appropriated. Firdaus's eventual refusal is therefore a refusal of the repeated assumption that men possess legitimate access to her body simply because they occupy socially recognized positions of authority. The significance of gendered violence in *Woman at Point Zero* consequently lies in its cumulative effect. Each episode adds to Firdaus's understanding that the structures surrounding her cannot be relied upon simply because they claim to represent family, marriage, morality, or protection. Her experience reveals the devastating consequences of a social order that expects women to endure violence while treating the authority of the men who inflict it as normal or defensible.

The novel thus transforms violence from a private matter into a literary examination of social responsibility. Firdaus's body records what the surrounding structures refuse to acknowledge. Her bruises, bleeding, numbness, confinement, and humiliation become evidence of a failure that is larger than any one man. Gendered violence is sustained when those who witness it normalize it, when institutions fail to intervene, and when women are taught that endurance is part of their virtue. Firdaus's eventual resistance emerges from this accumulated history, making her final confrontation not an isolated act of violence but the culmination of a long struggle against a world that repeatedly demanded her submission without guaranteeing her protection.

Economic Vulnerability and Women's Survival

The economic dimension of Firdaus's experience becomes more visible as she moves from the family home into marriage, employment, and prostitution. El Saadawi presents money as more than a means of satisfying material needs. For Firdaus, access to money is closely connected to the ability to make decisions about her own life. Her early experiences teach her that men control both resources and the choices attached to them. One of the clearest examples occurs when she reflects on something as ordinary as the fruit she eats: "No one had ever asked me before whether I preferred oranges or tangerines." (50) The significance of this statement lies in its simplicity. Firdaus is not describing the loss of a major possession but the absence of an opportunity to express preference. The men around her provide, but they do not necessarily ask. Her father, uncle, and husband possess the economic authority to decide what enters the household, while Firdaus learns to accept those decisions. The fruit therefore becomes a small but revealing symbol of a larger condition in which material provision is separated from female choice. This moment is important because it prevents economic dependence from being understood only in terms of poverty. Firdaus's problem is also the lack of

control over the conditions under which she receives what she needs. The question of oranges or tangerines becomes a question of whether she is recognized as a person capable of choosing. Economic power thus has a psychological dimension: the person who controls resources can also acquire the authority to define what another person should want.

Marriage reinforces this pattern. Firdaus enters marriage without an independent economic position strong enough to protect her from her husband's authority. Her experience demonstrates the danger of a social arrangement in which the husband is expected to provide while the wife is expected to depend. Dependence makes departure difficult, particularly when the surrounding family and social environment treats the marriage as an institution that must be preserved. Firdaus's eventual decision to leave Mahmoud changes her relationship with economic power. She is no longer willing to remain in a household simply because marriage gives her a socially recognized place. Her movement into paid work and prostitution is partly a search for the material independence necessary to make choices without seeking permission from a husband or male relative. Her first encounters with prostitution are therefore marked by a new awareness of exchange. Firdaus begins to understand that her labour has an economic value and that she can negotiate that value herself. When she asks a client, "How much will you pay?" (74), the question signals a significant shift in her position. Instead of waiting for a man to determine what he will give her, she participates directly in establishing the terms of the transaction. The importance of the question is not that prostitution suddenly makes Firdaus free. Rather, it shows her discovering an economic language through which she can exercise a degree of control. She can bargain over payment, refuse an inadequate offer, and accumulate money. Her bank account becomes particularly important because it gives her something she has rarely possessed: a resource that is attached to her own labour rather than to a man's decision to provide for her. This aspect of the novel complicates a purely victim-centred reading of prostitution. Firdaus does experience exploitation, but she also develops practical forms of agency within an exploitative environment. She learns how money works, how men behave when money is involved, and how financial independence can alter the balance of power between herself and those who seek access to her.

At the same time, El Saadawi refuses to romanticize this independence. Firdaus's income depends upon the commodification of her body. The fact that she can negotiate a price does not remove the unequal social conditions that make her body the principal resource through which she earns money. Her economic agency therefore operates within contradiction. She gains a measure of independence precisely through an activity that exposes her to another form of exploitation. This contradiction becomes particularly important when Firdaus attempts formal employment. Paid work appears to offer a more socially respectable route to independence, but the novel does not present the workplace as a space free from gendered power. Firdaus discovers that having a salary does not necessarily mean having complete control over her life. Male authority can enter the workplace through professional hierarchies, expectations, and attempts to exploit women's vulnerability. The contrast between prostitution and formal employment is consequently more complicated than a simple opposition between immoral work and respectable work. In both environments, Firdaus encounters men who recognize the economic value of her labour while attempting to exercise power over her. The difference is largely one of social appearance. Respectability does not automatically guarantee dignity, just as prostitution does not entirely eliminate the possibility of agency. Firdaus's later return to prostitution must therefore be understood within the limited choices available to her. She does not simply reject respectable employment because she prefers prostitution. Her decisions emerge from her experience of the different forms of power attached to each economic arrangement. She discovers that economic independence is valuable, but she also discovers that the social institutions through which women are expected to achieve independence can reproduce the same gendered inequalities they supposedly overcome.

Her relationship with Marzouk makes this problem explicit. Firdaus has acquired money and a degree of independence, but Marzouk attempts to place himself between her and the control she has established over her own labour. She describes herself as: "a body machine working day and night so that a number of men belonging to different professions could become immensely rich at my expense." (94) The metaphor of the "body machine" is particularly powerful because it brings the economic and bodily dimensions of Firdaus's exploitation together. A machine exists to produce something for someone else. By describing herself in these terms, Firdaus recognizes that her body has become an instrument from which other people derive

economic benefit. The phrase “at my expense” is equally significant. It reverses the conventional understanding of economic production. Firdaus is not merely a source of income; she is the person bearing the cost of the system that generates income for others. Her labour produces wealth, but the consequences of that labour—physical exhaustion, vulnerability, and loss of control—are borne by her. Marzouk therefore represents a new stage in Firdaus's struggle. Earlier, her economic vulnerability came from dependence upon men. Now, she possesses resources of her own, but a man still attempts to appropriate the benefits of those resources. El Saadawi consequently demonstrates that earning money is not sufficient to secure freedom when the social relations surrounding that money remain unequal. Firdaus's resistance to Marzouk is consequently connected to her economic history. She has already learned what it means to depend upon men for shelter and material security. She has also learned that the money she earns can provide a degree of independence. Marzouk's attempt to control her therefore threatens more than her immediate physical safety; it threatens the autonomy she has constructed through years of difficult experience.

The economic dimension of Firdaus's story also complicates the meaning of survival. She survives by learning how to use the resources available to her, even when those resources emerge from oppressive circumstances. Education becomes a resource. Paid employment becomes a resource. Prostitution becomes a resource. Money becomes a resource. Knowledge of men and their desires becomes a resource. None of these resources is entirely liberating, but together they expand the range of actions available to her. This is where Firdaus's agency needs to be understood carefully. She is neither completely free nor completely powerless. Her choices are made within circumstances shaped by gender, class, family, marriage, and economic inequality. Yet she repeatedly makes calculations within those circumstances. She learns when to leave, when to bargain, when to refuse, and when to resist. Her survival therefore depends upon practical forms of knowledge developed through experience. The novel consequently exposes a contradiction between women's expected responsibilities and their access to economic security. Firdaus is expected to fit into family and marital roles, but those roles do not guarantee her independent access to resources. When she attempts to create that independence herself, she enters economic systems that continue to expose her to exploitation. The problem is therefore not solved simply by moving from dependence to employment or from employment to self-employment. What changes is Firdaus's understanding of what economic independence means. At first, independence means having enough money to leave a man. Later, it becomes the ability to determine the value of her labour and refuse arrangements she considers unacceptable. Economic autonomy therefore develops gradually as a form of consciousness. Firdaus begins to understand that survival requires not only access to resources but also some degree of authority over those resources.

Her experience ultimately suggests that women's economic vulnerability is inseparable from the wider structures that organize gender relations. Where women depend upon men for shelter, food, employment, or social legitimacy, the person controlling the resource can exercise considerable power over the woman receiving it. Where women enter paid labour without equal power to determine its conditions, economic participation may coexist with exploitation. And where women create independent sources of income, men may still attempt to appropriate the resulting power.

Firdaus's survival is therefore marked by movement rather than resolution. She does not discover one economic arrangement that finally guarantees her safety. Instead, she moves through different forms of dependence and independence, learning from each. This movement gives the economic dimension of the novel its complexity. El Saadawi neither presents money as the complete answer to women's oppression nor dismisses economic independence as meaningless. Money matters because it creates possibilities; it remains insufficient because possibilities can still be constrained by unequal social relations. The significance of Firdaus's economic journey, therefore, lies in the relationship between resources and agency. Her increasing ability to earn and control money expands her capacity to make decisions, but it does not remove the gendered structures within which those decisions are made. Survival becomes a continuous process of negotiating those structures. Firdaus's economic experience consequently strengthens the novel's broader argument: when women are denied reliable protection and independent access to resources, they are forced to develop their own strategies for survival, even when the available strategies expose them to new forms of vulnerability.

Cameroon in Dialogue with Woman at Point Zero

The relevance of *Woman at Point Zero* to contemporary Cameroon emerges most clearly when Firdaus's experiences are placed beside specific conditions affecting women rather than when the novel is treated as a general representation of African womanhood. El Saadawi's Egypt and contemporary Cameroon are historically, legally, and culturally distinct contexts. Nevertheless, the novel provides a useful literary language for examining situations in which women are expected to remain within relationships, sustain families, respect social expectations, or endure hardship while the protection that should accompany these responsibilities becomes inadequate. The comparison is therefore not between identical societies but between particular experiences of gendered power. Firdaus's marriage provides the first important point of cross-reference. When she recalls that "A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband" (70), the statement reveals how female endurance can be turned into a moral expectation. Her suffering becomes something she is expected to absorb rather than a condition requiring the intervention of those around her. A related contradiction appears in contemporary Cameroon, although in a different legal and social context. UNFPA Cameroon and MINPROFF report that gender-based violence remains pervasive and that, in the North-West and South-West, women and girls experience emotional abuse, denial of resources, and physical and sexual assault; the report also notes that cultural norms can associate women with responsibility for maintaining family honour (UNFPA and MINPROFF). The parallel is therefore not that Cameroonian women occupy Firdaus's exact position. Rather, both contexts reveal how expectations concerning women's responsibilities within family life can coexist with conditions in which women's own safety is inadequately protected.

The distinction becomes particularly important when considering the role of family and community. In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus's uncle does not respond to her husband's violence by demanding that the husband stop. Instead, he tells her that husbands beat their wives, while his wife confirms that she too experiences violence (70). Family, in this instance, does not disappear; it intervenes by normalizing what Firdaus suffers. Contemporary Cameroon presents a more complicated picture. Family and community structures can provide protection, mediation, accommodation, and material assistance, but they can also pressure women to preserve relationships in which they are unsafe. Human Rights Watch reports that women seeking assistance in Cameroon have sometimes been pressured to reconcile with abusive partners or blamed for the violence rather than receiving effective protection (Human Rights Watch). The cross-reference is therefore significant: in both the novel and the contemporary Cameroonian evidence, the problem is not simply the existence of family structures but what happens when the responsibility to preserve family relationships becomes stronger than the responsibility to protect the woman within them. Firdaus's physical experience of marital violence makes the comparison sharper. She recalls: "One day he hit me with his heavy stick until the blood ran from my nose and ears" (72). The image of blood turns what might otherwise be described as domestic conflict into unmistakable bodily violence. In Cameroon, recent evidence likewise shows that violence against women frequently occurs within intimate relationships rather than only in anonymous public spaces. Human Rights Watch reports that the women interviewed for its 2026 investigation experienced overlapping physical, psychological, emotional, and economic forms of violence, most often involving husbands or intimate partners (Human Rights Watch). The similarity lies in the location of violence: the intimate relationship that should provide security can become the place where bodily vulnerability is greatest. The difference, however, must be preserved. Firdaus's experience belongs to the social world constructed by El Saadawi's novel, whereas the Cameroonian evidence comes from contemporary survivors living within a different legal and socioeconomic environment. The value of the comparison lies in the recurring problem of protection, not in claiming historical equivalence.

The question of economic dependence provides an even stronger connection between the novel and Cameroon. Firdaus's observation that "No one had ever asked me before whether I preferred oranges or tangerines" (50) initially appears trivial, but it reveals a deeper history of men making material decisions for her. The issue is not simply that she lacks money. Her preferences have been rendered unnecessary because men control the resources through which everyday choices are made. This literary detail can be cross-referenced with contemporary Cameroon, where economic control has been identified as part of gender-based violence. Human Rights Watch reports that some women interviewed in Cameroon had their

businesses closed, work equipment destroyed, employment restricted, or property disposed of by husbands, leaving them economically dependent and making it more difficult to leave abusive relationships (Human Rights Watch). Firdaus's experience and these Cameroonian cases therefore meet at the point where control over resources becomes control over possibilities. This connection also clarifies why economic hardship should not be separated from violence. Firdaus's eventual movement toward prostitution is partly a response to her need for material independence. When she asks a client, "How much will you pay?" (74), she is doing more than negotiating a sexual transaction. She is attempting to convert the only resource she believes she possesses into an independent means of survival. Contemporary Cameroon presents a different economic environment, but the relationship between economic dependence and women's exposure to violence remains visible. Human Rights Watch reports that women's limited access to land, income, employment, property, and social security can constrain their ability to leave abusive relationships (Human Rights Watch). The difference is important: Firdaus turns to prostitution as a particular survival strategy within the novel, while Cameroonian women employ a much wider range of economic strategies and live within different labour and family systems. What can be compared is not the particular occupation but the underlying relationship between economic autonomy and the ability to make meaningful choices.

The comparison becomes especially revealing in relation to women who remain in difficult relationships because leaving carries material consequences. Firdaus repeatedly discovers that escape requires resources. Leaving Mahmoud does not place her immediately in a secure environment; her subsequent dependence exposes her to another man's control. Her experience demonstrates that physical departure and genuine independence are not necessarily the same thing. A similar problem appears in Cameroon, where Human Rights Watch documents cases in which economic deprivation, loss of employment, property dispossession, and lack of social security make it difficult for women to leave abusive relationships (Human Rights Watch). In both cases, therefore, the question is not simply whether a woman wants to leave. It is whether she possesses the material and institutional means to make leaving sustainable. This is where the concept of patriarchal abandonment provides a useful bridge between the literary text and the Cameroonian context. Firdaus is repeatedly expected to fulfil social roles without receiving the corresponding protection that those roles should entail. The Cameroonian evidence similarly shows a gap between formal responsibility and actual protection. Human Rights Watch reports that Cameroon lacks a comprehensive national policy or guidelines on domestic violence and that survivors may encounter weak coordination among police, courts, health providers, and social services (Human Rights Watch). The two contexts therefore converge around a structural contradiction: authority and expectations may remain in place even when effective mechanisms of protection are inadequate.

The problem becomes still more serious when violence is fatal. Firdaus's final act of killing Marzouk emerges after a long history of physical, sexual, economic, and psychological domination. Her act cannot be separated from the accumulated failures that precede it. Contemporary Cameroon has also faced growing concern about femicide. Human Rights Watch reported in August 2026 that violence against women and girls in Cameroon remains widespread and that the country has experienced increased femicide cases, with accountability remaining limited (Human Rights Watch). The comparison must again remain precise. Firdaus is the fictional protagonist of a novel written in an Egyptian context; Cameroonian femicide involves real women, real perpetrators, and contemporary institutions. Yet the juxtaposition raises a common question: at what point does repeated gendered violence reveal not merely individual cruelty but a failure of the structures expected to prevent it? The Cameroonian context also prevents the concept of patriarchal abandonment from becoming an argument against African culture itself. UNFPA and MINPROFF identify cultural norms and stereotypes as factors that can contribute to gender-based violence, including the perception of women as property or as responsible for family honour (UNFPA and MINPROFF). Such evidence should not be transformed into the claim that African cultural values are inherently violent. Family responsibility, communal mediation, respect for elders, marriage, motherhood, and collective responsibility can all perform protective functions. The critical question is what happens when those values are selectively applied—when women are expected to preserve family honour but are not equally protected from violence, or when reconciliation is valued without sufficient attention to the woman's safety.

This distinction is also visible in Firdaus's story. Her resistance does not arise because she suddenly rejects every cultural or familial value. It develops because the responsibilities imposed upon her repeatedly become detached from reciprocal responsibility toward her. She is expected to obey her husband, yet her husband abuses her. She is expected to preserve respectability, yet respectability does not protect her. She is expected to remain within relationships, yet those relationships repeatedly expose her to danger. The problem, therefore, is not responsibility itself but its unequal distribution.

Contemporary Cameroon similarly requires attention to women's agency rather than a representation of women solely as victims. The women documented by UNFPA and MINPROFF speak about their experiences, identify forms of violence, and articulate their needs and recommendations (UNFPA and MINPROFF). Their experiences should not be reduced to helplessness. Like Firdaus, although in very different circumstances, women negotiate the conditions in which they live. They seek assistance, work, leave relationships, rely upon family networks, pursue legal remedies, and develop strategies of survival. The comparison therefore supports a postcolonial feminist emphasis on agency within constraint rather than a simple victim-versus-liberation binary. The dialogue between *Woman at Point Zero* and contemporary Cameroon ultimately makes the concept of patriarchal abandonment more precise. In Firdaus's case, family, marriage, and male authority make demands upon her while repeatedly failing to secure her safety. In Cameroon, contemporary evidence reveals different but related tensions involving intimate-partner violence, economic control, family expectations, and institutional protection. The comparison does not establish that Egypt and Cameroon have the same gender system. Instead, it shows how the literary experience of Firdaus can illuminate a question that remains relevant in another African context: what happens when women are held responsible for sustaining relationships and social life, while the responsibility to protect them is weakened, displaced, or denied? The significance of *Woman at Point Zero* for a contemporary Cameroonian reading therefore lies in its ability to make this contradiction visible through the life of one woman. Firdaus's story moves from dependence to violence, from violence to economic self-reliance, and from survival to resistance. Contemporary Cameroon demonstrates that these questions cannot be confined to literature. Gendered violence, economic control, family responsibility, and failures of protection remain material realities. Reading the novel alongside these realities does not make Firdaus a representative of Cameroonian women. Rather, it allows her story to become a critical lens through which the relationship between expectation, responsibility, protection, abandonment, and survival can be reconsidered.

CONCLUSION

This article has read Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* through the concept of patriarchal abandonment, arguing that Firdaus's experience cannot be understood fully through oppression alone. Patriarchal oppression explains the systems of control imposed upon her, but patriarchal abandonment draws attention to a further contradiction: the same structures that demand her obedience, endurance, sexual respectability, and family responsibility repeatedly fail to provide the protection, material security, and justice that those demands presuppose. Her family fails her, her marriage becomes a site of violence rather than security, and economic dependence repeatedly narrows her possibilities. Her eventual survival therefore develops through negotiation and resistance rather than through the successful operation of the institutions surrounding her. The reading has also shown why a postcolonial feminist approach is necessary. Firdaus should neither be reduced to a passive victim nor transformed into a universal symbol of the "Third World woman." Spivak's concern with representation, Mohanty's insistence on historical and cultural specificity, and Nnaemeka's emphasis on negotiation allow her actions to be understood within the particular conditions that shape them. Such a reading also prevents the comparison with Cameroon from becoming an argument that African culture is inherently oppressive. Family, marriage, kinship, community, and cultural values may provide belonging, protection, responsibility, and social continuity; they may also become restrictive when responsibility and authority are unequally distributed.

The dialogue with contemporary Cameroon makes this contradiction especially visible. Current evidence points to intimate partner violence, economic violence, denial of resources, discriminatory family arrangements, pressure to reconcile with abusers, and increasing concern over femicide. These realities do not reproduce Firdaus's Egypt, nor does the novel provide a sociological explanation for Cameroon. Its

value lies elsewhere: it offers a literary framework for examining how women may be required to sustain relationships and social responsibilities while receiving inadequate protection from the very structures that impose those responsibilities. The significance of patriarchal abandonment, therefore, lies in shifting attention from violence alone to the conditions that allow women to be left to survive violence. It asks not only who harms women, but who is expected to protect them, who carries responsibility when protection fails, and what happens when women must create their own means of survival. Firdaus's story answers these questions in disturbing terms. Her survival is neither complete liberation nor simple defeat. It is the consequence of a woman learning to act within structures that have repeatedly constrained and abandoned her. Read alongside contemporary Cameroon, *Woman at Point Zero* consequently remains relevant not because its protagonist represents all women, but because her story exposes a recurring contradiction in gendered social relations: women may be expected to preserve family, marriage, morality, and community while being denied the security and agency necessary to survive them.

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