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Reimagining Womanhood: A feminist Discourse Analysis of Selected African Literature in English

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Abstract

Nawal El Saadawi's Woman at Point Zero offers a powerful exploration of women's experiences in a patriarchal society, shedding light on the struggles and resilience of female characters. This study examines the novel's portrayal of women's struggles against societal oppression and its implications for understanding womanhood in Africa. Comparative analysis with other seminal works of African literature, including Nervous Conditions – Tsitsi Dangarembga,The First Woman's Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi and Stay with Me by Ayọ̀bámi Adebayò reveals the shared perspectives on women's experiences that shape the discourse on womanhood in Africa. This research underscores the transformative potential of literature in inspiring societal change and invites further exploration of the complex issues surrounding women's lives.Through a feminist critique informed by intersectionality, this analysis reveals the novel's advocacy for female agency and its challenge to traditional gender roles. The study demonstrates the significance of literary works in shaping cultural narratives and promoting social change, contributing to ongoing discussions on feminism, African literature, and post colonialism.

Keywords: **Feminist critique, Intersectionality, womanhood, African literature, societal oppression.**

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INTRODUCTION

African literature, like the continent itself, is vast, diverse, and continually evolving. It has long functioned as a space where history, culture, identity, and resistance are negotiated through story. From the anti-colonial poetry of Leopold Senghor to the nationalist narratives of Chinua Achebe, African writers have used literature to engage with the legacies of colonialism, the trauma of postcolonial nation-building, and the complexities of modern African identity. Yet, for much of its history, African literature has been dominated by male voices and concerns. While nationhood, tribal identity, and colonial critique occupied center stage, gender—especially the nuanced experiences of African women were frequently relegated to the margins or shaped by patriarchal assumptions.

It is against this backdrop that the work of Nawal El Saadawi emerges not merely as feminist but as revolutionary. First published in 1975 in Arabic and later translated into English in 1983, *Woman at Point Zero* disrupted dominant literary and social narratives in Egypt and across the continent. While her protagonist, Firdaus, speaks from within the walls of a Cairo prison, her voice echoes far beyond those walls, cutting across borders, cultures, and time periods. Firdaus's story a life marked by violence, exploitation, and erasure culminates not in resignation, but in a defiant, final act of agency. Her decision to tell her story only once, on her own terms, transforms her from a figure of pity to a symbol of power.

Despite its Egyptian setting, *Woman at Point Zero* has found resonance across the broader landscape of African literature, particularly among women writers who, like El Saadawi, confront the intersectional forces that shape women's lives. Firdaus is not merely an Egyptian woman—she is a stand-in for the millions of African women who have been marginalized, silenced, or reduced to archetypes within both literature and society. She demands to be seen not as a victim, but as a subject: a woman who, despite every effort to erase her, insists on speaking her truth.

Since the publication of El Saadawi's novel, a new generation of African women writers has emerged—authors who are reshaping the literary terrain through stories that center on women's

voices, bodies, and inner lives. Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *The First Woman*, and Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s *Stay with Me* are only a few of the groundbreaking works that continue the legacy initiated by El Saadawi. These texts delve into a wide array of feminist themes: the bodily autonomy denied to women under traditional and religious structures, the weaponization of motherhood and fertility, the psychological toll of societal expectations, and the redemptive power of storytelling and memory. Each author brings her own cultural specificity to the table Zimbabwean, Ugandan, Nigerian but together, they engage in a continental conversation about what it means to be a woman in African societies that are often still governed by patriarchal logic.

This paper explores how *Woman at Point Zero* functions as a foundational feminist text within African literature and how its central themes of resistance, bodily autonomy, and voice are echoed, complicated, and expanded by contemporary African women writers. Using intersectional and postcolonial feminist frameworks, This paper examines the evolving portrayal of womanhood in African fiction—not as a static identity, but as a contested and dynamic space shaped by history, culture, and personal experience.

Importantly, this paper does not seek to universalize African womanhood. Rather, it seeks to map the terrain of feminist expression in African literature, recognizing both its shared resonances and its cultural particularities. Firdaus, Tambu, Kirabo, and Yejide are not the same woman. They are, however, part of the same literary and political genealogy women who, in their own voices and on their own terms, challenge the systems that seek to define and confine them. By placing *Woman at Point Zero* in conversation with these contemporary works, this paper argues that African feminist literature is not simply a critique of gender oppression it is a bold and necessary act of imagining new ways of being. It is literature that not only tells stories, but changes who gets to tell them, and why.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To critically engage with Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and its feminist legacy in contemporary African literature, this paper adopts a multi-layered theoretical approach. Feminist

theory is not monolithic, and as such, the framework employed here reflects a diversity of feminist thought: **intersectional feminism**, **postcolonial feminism**, and **feminist narratology**. Each of these lenses offers distinct, yet complementary, tools for analyzing the literary, cultural, and political dimensions of African womanhood as constructed in the selected texts.

Intersectional Feminism: Reading across Structures of Power

The concept of intersectionality, first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her landmark 1989 essay *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*, provides a foundational lens for this paper. Crenshaw critiques the tendency of legal and political systems—as well as mainstream feminism to overlook the ways in which race, class, gender, and other identity categories intersect to create unique modes of oppression. Intersectionality insists that the experience of, for example, a poor, uneducated African woman cannot be adequately understood by examining gender alone; her social location is shaped simultaneously by class, education, culture, and historical context.

Firdaus in Woman at Point Zero embodies this intersectionality with painful clarity. Her oppression is not merely gendered—it is socio-economic, educational, religious, and institutional. She is orphaned, denied schooling ("to a place where she will be sitting side by side with men? A respected Sheikh and man of religion like myself sending his niece off to mix in the company of men?!"; Saadawi, 1975/2007, p. 15), sexually abused by her uncle, and married off to the abusive Sheikh Mahmoud, who justifies beating her "with the precepts of religion" (Saadawi, 1975/2007, p. 33). She is ultimately criminalized and imprisoned for killing her pimp. Each of these experiences is structured by the intersecting systems of patriarchy, poverty, and religious moralism. Through this lens, Firdaus is not simply a "woman"—she is a subject shaped by the convergence of multiple structural forces.

Likewise, the protagonists in Stay with Me, Nervous Conditions, and The First Woman reflect a similar complexity. Yejide's suffering is inseparable from societal expectations of motherhood, but also from her social class, marital role, and the cultural weight placed on reproduction in

Yoruba society. She resorts to a fertility ritual—"breastfeeding a goat at the Mountain of Jaw-Dropping Miracles" (Adébáyọ̀, 2017, p. 68)—and faces the emotional devastation of Akin taking a second wife under family pressure (Adébáyọ̀, 2017). Tambu's awakening to the oppressive forces in her life comes not only through her gendered experience but also through her exposure to colonial education systems and class distinctions. She laments that "the needs and sensibilities of the women in my family were not considered a priority, or even legitimate" (Dangarembga, 1988/2004, p. 27), gaining access to education only after her brother's death, which exposes deeply entrenched gender bias. Kirabo's feminist consciousness in The First Woman emerges through oral traditions and intergenerational storytelling, as she learns that "women had been split in two: the good woman and the original woman," a division that polices women's autonomy and voices (Kukama, 2020, p. 15). These narratives operate within a broader context of patriarchal and postcolonial legacies. Intersectionality allows us to avoid flattening these characters into mere symbols and instead recognize their full, lived realities.

Postcolonial Feminism: Reclaiming Voice, Context, and Complexity

The limitations of Western feminist paradigms in addressing the specific experiences of women in formerly colonized societies have been thoroughly critiqued by postcolonial feminists. Thinkers such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Obioma Nnaemeka (2003) have highlighted the dangers of universalizing womanhood or assuming that all women's struggles are identical across global contexts.

In her influential work *Feminism Without Borders* (2003), Mohanty argues that Western feminist scholarship often constructs the "Third World woman" as a homogenous, passive victim in need of saving—thus perpetuating colonial binaries and undermining the agency of women in the Global South. Instead, Mohanty calls for a transnational feminist practice that is attuned to context, difference, and solidarity, rather than simplistic sameness.

El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* often suffers from this kind of misreading, particularly when approached solely through Western feminist paradigms. While the novel certainly critiques male

violence and religious hypocrisy, it is also deeply rooted in specific socio-political and religious dynamics within Egypt and the broader Arab-African world. A postcolonial feminist reading ensures that Firdaus's rebellion is understood within the logic of her own world, not as a quest for Western liberal freedom, but as a deeply personal and political negotiation of her dignity and personhood.

This insistence on local specificity is carried forward by writers like Makumbi, whose *The First Woman* resists both Western feminist frameworks and African patriarchal traditions. Makumbi offers a feminist philosophy that draws on indigenous knowledge systems, particularly oral histories and matriarchal memory, to articulate a Ugandan-centered feminist narrative. Similarly, in *Stay with Me*, Adébáyọ̀ critiques not just patriarchal norms, but the cultural and familial systems that enable them often subtly, with empathy rather than condemnation.

Postcolonial feminism also encourages readers to examine how colonial histories have shaped contemporary gender roles and systems of knowledge. In *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga explores how colonial education—seen as a gateway to progress—often reinforces patriarchal hierarchies by privileging male voices and marginalizing female intellectual development. Tambu's journey toward self-awareness is, in part, a critique of how colonial and traditional structures collude to define and limit African womanhood.

The Politics of Who Speaks and How

Narrative, as a medium, is never neutral. Who tells the story, how it is told, and under what conditions profoundly affect meaning. Feminist narratology offers tools for analyzing the power dynamics embedded in storytelling especially in relation to gender. Scholars such as Robyn Warhol(2001), Susan Lanser(2000), and Shari Benstock(2001) have emphasized that narrative voice, structure, and genre conventions can reinforce or resist patriarchal ideologies.

Firdaus's narrative in Woman at Point Zero is framed within a male-dominated institutional context—she tells her story to a male psychiatrist, on the eve of her execution, inside a prison. Indeed, the novel opens with a psychiatrist conducting research among female inmates, and

Firdaus chooses when to speak—on the day before her execution—thereby exerting complete narrative control (Saadawi, 2007). Yet, paradoxically, she exercises total narrative control. She dictates when and how she will speak. Her voice is uninterrupted. The institutional figure is silenced, reduced to a mere listener. This inversion of power through narrative structure is one of the novel's most radical feminist gestures.

In The First Woman, narrative structure becomes a tool for feminist recovery. Kirabo's story is shaped through fragmented timelines, mythic storytelling, and oral memory. Makumbi integrates Ugandan folklore and myth throughout the novel, using Kirabo's love of oral stories to reflect her evolving consciousness as she moves between rural life and Kampala (Makumbi, 2020; Owuor, 2020). These narrative choices reflect indigenous knowledge systems that resist colonial and linear frameworks of truth. Kirabo's identity is not discovered through rational progress, but through the weaving together of personal, ancestral, and communal stories. This decentralization of narrative voice embodies a feminist resistance to patriarchal authority.

In Nervous Conditions, Tambu functions as both narrator and subject, reflecting critically on her own journey with increasing discomfort and ambiguity. Dangarembga (2004) crafts a dual-self narrative where the older, reflective Tambu recounts her younger self with psychological complexity: "I could not cold-bloodedly inform my sisters that I had been thinking of how much I disliked our brother... That I still managed to do so meant I must dislike him very much indeed!" (p. 19). This introspection, and the shift from certainty to questioning, marks a narrative evolution that mirrors feminist consciousness itself.

Yejide, too, in Stay with Me, tells her story in multiple voices—hers and her husband's—revealing the tensions, silences, and contradictions that shape intimate and societal relationships. Adébáyọ̀ (2017) alternates between Yejide's first-person voice and Akin's perspective, a technique that "humanizes both characters and shows their conflicting emotional landscapes" (Akinmade, 2019). The split narrative humanizes both characters but also reveals how power moves differently through gendered bodies.

Feminist narratology helps us see that how a woman tells her story is as important as what she says. In the case of African feminist literature, storytelling becomes a subversive act—an opportunity to reclaim control over one's life, memory, and identity.

A Synthesis of Approaches: Toward a Contextual African Feminism

While each theoretical approach offers unique insights, their combined use provides a richer, more ethical reading of African feminist literature. Intersectionality enables us to map overlapping systems of oppression; postcolonial feminism ensures our analyses remain rooted in cultural and historical context; feminist narratology allows us to appreciate the literary and structural innovations that empower these texts. Together, these theories not only deepen our understanding of characters like Firdaus, Tambu, Yejide, and Kirabo, but also affirm the importance of multi-vocal, culturally grounded, and narratively inventive feminist expression in African literature.

This paper, therefore, does not apply theory for theory's sake. Rather, it uses these frameworks to listen better to the stories African women are telling, the silences they are breaking, and the futures they are imagining.

Methodology

This study uses qualitative literary analysis, with an emphasis on thematic interpretation, intertextual comparison, and close reading. The methodology involves qualitative and descriptive analysis of *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi of Egypt with Intertextuality of *Nervous Conditions*' Tsitsi Dangarembga of Zimbabwe, *The First Woman* Jennifer's Nansubuga Makumbi of Uganda and *Stay with Me*'s Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀ of Nigeria. These texts were selected for their geographic diversity and their shared focus on gender, power, and resistance.

The analysis integrates sociopolitical context, authorial interviews, and critical scholarship to enhance interpretation. This approach acknowledges how embedded literature is within specific cultural, historical, and ideological frameworks. It dives deeply into the thematic and symbolic elements across the four chosen novels. It not only portrays the parallels between El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and contemporary African feminist fiction but also demonstrates the evolution of feminist concerns and literary strategies.

Firdaus and the Politics of Solitude

The novel *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi tells the tragic story of Firdaus, a woman condemned to death for murdering the man who exploited her. Through Firdaus's narrative, Saadawi masterfully explores the complexities of female existence within a patriarchal society, where women are reduced to mere commodities. As Firdaus recounts her life journey, from a vulnerable child to a defiant woman, her story serves as a powerful testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of systemic oppression.

Saadawi sheds light on the societal norms that perpetuate female subjugation, forcing women into positions of powerlessness. Yet, Firdaus's journey is not one of victimhood; rather, it is a testament to her growing awareness and resistance. Her ultimate act of defiance is a calculated response to the relentless oppression she faces, a moment of liberation in a life marked by confinement. Through Firdaus's story, Saadawi gives voice to the silenced and marginalized, crafting a narrative that is both a powerful indictment of patriarchal society and a testament to the enduring power of female resistance. The novel stands as a call to action, urging readers to confront the brutal realities of patriarchy and challenge the systems that perpetuate women's subjugation, making "Woman at Point Zero" a masterpiece of literature that continues to resonate with readers today.

In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus is a woman completely isolated by her reality. Her relationships with her uncle, her husband, her employers, and her clients are all marked by betrayal and domination. Even when she gains a semblance of control as a high-end prostitute, it

is illusory. El Saadawi presents Firdaus's final act murder and subsequent refusal to appeal as a declaration of radical agency. By choosing death, she affirms her humanity in a world that has persistently denied it.Her solitude is both her weakness and her power. Unlike many modern protagonists, Firdaus does not find strength in community. This stands in stark contrast to the later literary portrayals of women whose strength is bolstered by solidarity and shared struggle.

Tambu and the Intellect as a Site of Resistance

In Nervous Conditions, Tambu's rebellion is intellectual rather than existential. While she does not reject the world through death, she challenges its structures through education and reflection. "Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 36). Her realization that the mission education system is complicit in her oppression marks her awakening: "I was beginning to understand that the benefits of education were not to be had for nothing" (p. 95). What makes Tambu's story revolutionary is its subtlety. She is not radical in the same dramatic sense as Firdaus, but her quiet resistance to her family's expectations and her eventual rejection of the "civilizing" colonial mission echo the same feminist refusal to be silenced.

Yejide's Reproductive Struggles and Societal Shame

Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s Stay with Me places motherhood at the centre of womanhood and critiques this very framing. Yejide's worth, in the eyes of her husband and society, is tied to her womb: "I had been married for two years but I was yet to conceive. Every time I saw Moomi, she reminded me that I was yet to do what women should" (Adébáyọ̀, 2017, p. 3). Her inability to conceive leads to invasive rituals, medical experimentation, and profound emotional trauma: "I sat in that barber's chair, with his blade scraping my scalp, because somebody said it would help me get pregnant" (p. 16). Unlike Firdaus, Yejide has moments of connection, love, and even happiness: "Even now, I cannot remember those months without feeling again the peace that settled over me as Akin's arms tightened around me" (p. 45), but her bodily autonomy is never guaranteed. The novel critiques how African societies reduce women to their reproductive

function. Yejide's final decision to leave like Firdaus's final act is about reclaiming self, even at the cost of comfort or convention.

Kirabo's Journey to Self-Mythology

In The First Woman, Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi crafts a rich, intergenerational narrative of a girl seeking to understand her identity in a patriarchal society. Kirabo's journey is framed by stories: those told to her, those she uncovers, and those she learns to tell herself. When she confesses to Nsuuta, "I hate chores, I hate kneeling and I cannot stand babies," the witch responds with a mythic genealogy of women's original state: "We were not squeezed inside, we were huge, strong, bold, loud, proud, brave, independent. But it was too much for the world and they got rid of it" (Makumbi, 2021, p. 42).

What sets Kirabo apart is her refusal to accept simplistic narratives about womanhood. Her exposure to multiple female perspectives—grandmothers, aunties, and mythic ancestors—allows her to piece together a plural, dynamic understanding of self. Nsuuta reinforces this by saying, "Promise me you will pass on the story of the first woman… Telling origin stories was their act of resistance. Stories are critical, Kirabo… The minute we fall silent, someone will fill the silence for us" (Makumbi, 2021, p. 43).

Unlike Firdaus, Kirabo's story is grounded in community, even as it critiques it. Her identity formation is communal—anchored in oral memory, mythic resistance, and multiple women's voices—rather than in isolation or self-erasure.

Storytelling, Silence, and Narrative Power

All four texts grapple with the tension between silence and voice. Firdaus speaks only once, and it is a speech that no one can interrupt. Yejide, though less overt, is silenced repeatedly by her family and the medical establishment. Tambu's narrative itself is reclamation of voice: the act of writing becomes her liberation. Kirabo's voice grows through storytelling and cultural memory, affirming that the power to speak is also the power to survive. This shared emphasis on

storytelling affirms what postcolonial feminism argues: that speaking is not just an act of communication; it is an act of revolution. While the stories unfold in different national and cultural contexts, they share thematic commonalities: gender violence, imposed silence, societal expectations, and the search for agency. Yet, each author uses local idioms, folklore, and narrative structures to express these struggles. This reflects the richness of African feminisms plural, adaptive, and deeply embedded in cultural context.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from the analysis, the following recommendations aim to enhance scholarly and cultural engagement with African feminist literature: Universities, especially in Africa and the Global North—should prioritize feminist African literature in English and comparative literature programs. This inclusion should go beyond tokenism, encouraging deep engagement with theory and context. While Western feminism offers valuable tools, African contexts require frameworks rooted in local realities. Concepts like "motherism (Warhol, R. (2012))," "nego-feminism (Anna Julia 1892)," and "Ubuntu feminism(Gagiano, A. (2010))" should be explored, taught, and refined. Many African feminist texts remain inaccessible due to linguistic barriers. Funding for translation into African and international languages would democratize access and broaden readership. Pan-African literary festivals, writer residencies, and digital storytelling platforms should foster collaboration among African women writers. These networks would encourage the exchange of feminist thought across borders. Feminist literature should not exist in disciplinary silos. Combining literary analysis with history, sociology, and anthropology allows for a fuller understanding of the cultural work literature performs.

CONCLUSION

Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* remains one of the most potent feminist texts to emerge from the African continent, not just for its searing critique of patriarchy, but for its bold insistence that a silenced woman can become the author of her own liberation, even in the face of death. Firdaus's decision to tell her story, not out of desperation but out of defiance, marked a

literary and political rupture. She did not seek redemption or sympathy. She demanded to be heard on her own terms. That demand continues to reverberate through African literature today.

This paper has argued that *Woman at Point Zero* laid the foundation for an evolving feminist discourse in African literature, one that has grown richer, more intersectional, and more culturally grounded through the contributions of contemporary women writers like Tsitsi Dangarembga, Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, and Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀. These authors expand upon El Saadawi's legacy not by mimicking it, but by localizing and personalizing feminist struggles in their own socio-cultural contexts. From Tambu's intellectual resistance to colonial-patriarchal hierarchies in *Nervous Conditions*, to Kirabo's journey through ancestral wisdom and self-discovery in *The First Woman*, to Yejide's painful reckoning with reproductive expectations in *Stay with Me*, African women characters are being reimagined not as passive recipients of suffering, but as complex, thinking, feeling agents of change.

What unites these narratives despite their differences in tone, setting, and structure is their unwavering commitment to reclaiming womanhood as a space of possibility. These texts do not offer easy resolutions. Firdaus dies. Yejide walks away from her marriage shattered but alive. Tambu questions the cost of her education. Kirabo finds identity in fragments of stories told and untold. Yet within these narratives, there is a profound refusal to be erased. That refusal, more than anything, defines the contemporary feminist voice in African literature.

The role of storytelling, as this paper has shown, is central to this redefinition. For African women writers, narrative is not just a tool of expression—it is a strategy of survival and resistance. Whether through oral traditions, fragmented memories, or acts of narrative rebellion, these authors and their characters challenge the structures that have historically sought to silence them. By telling their stories, these women—both real and fictional—inscribe themselves into history, reclaiming their place in the literary canon and the social imagination.

This literature is not merely about individual acts of defiance. As newer texts have shown, the future of African feminist writing lies not only in the isolated cry for freedom but in the

recognition of collective memory, community-based resistance, and intergenerational healing. Firdaus's lonely resistance has given way to a broader chorus of voices—voices that speak in multiple dialects, through varied experiences, and across borders, yet are united in their challenge to patriarchal authority and their vision for new possibilities. In this way, *Woman at Point Zero* is not a closed story, it is a starting point. It is the opening chapter of a conversation that continues to be written by African women across the continent and the diaspora. As long as systems of oppression continue to exist and they do the need for feminist storytelling, for reimagining womanhood, remains urgent and essential.

To read African feminist literature is to witness a rewriting of the world—not just from the perspective of women, but through their agency, their questions, their pain, and their power. These stories demand that we listen differently, that we ask deeper questions about justice, identity, and freedom. And most importantly, they remind us that the act of imagining new forms of womanhood is itself a radical, transformative, and ongoing process.

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