

العنف القائم على النوع الاجتماعي والفاعلية النسوية في روايتي "امرأة عند نقطة الصفر" لنوال السعداوي و"محبوبة" لتوني موريسون

## Gendered Violence and Female Agency in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* IBRAHEEM AJEEL DAKHIL

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**Abstract :** This paper synthesizes scholarship regarding on gendered violence and women's agency, as presented in *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. Although direct comparative studies that occur during this period are not widely found in the literature that has been provided, this analysis relies on the personal evaluation of each of the novels. *Woman at Point Zero* is analyzed in the way Firdaus is oppressed by patriarchal structures, such as female genital mutilation (FGM), economic oppression, and marginalization in the system, and her resistance and identity recovery. *Beloved* portrays the experienced deep trauma and structural violence experienced by Black women in the slavery system that centers around physical and sexual abuse, commodification of the body, and the mental effect of past injustices in its characters, such as Sethe. Both novels reveal the theme of gendered violence, which is firmly rooted in socio-economic and cultural systems, and the protagonists can exhibit various modes of agency despite such severe oppression. The review draws the similarity in the systemic quality of violence, commodification of the body, and resilience, and the difference based on the specific socio-historical contexts. It ends with the determination of possible avenues to do future comparative research to gain further insights into the influence of various oppressive systems on the experience and female agentic expression.

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نقطة الصفر" لنوال السعداوي و"محبوبة" لتوني موريسون. ورغم ندرة الدراسات المقارنة المباشرة التي تناولت هذه الفترة في الأدبيات المتاحة، إلا أن هذا التحليل يعتمد على التقييم الشخصي لكتلتي الروائيتين. تُحلل رواية "امرأة عند نقطة الصفر" من خلال تصوير معاناة فردوس من قمع البنى الأبوية، كختان الإناث، والقمع الاقتصادي، والتهميش في النظام، ومقاومتها واستعادة هويتها. أما رواية "محبوبة" فتناقش من خلال تصويرها للصدمة العميقة والعنف البنيوي الذي عانت منه النساء السود في نظام العبودية، والذي يتمحور حول الإيذاء الجسدي والجنسي، وتشويه الجسد، والأثر النفسي للظلم الماضي على شخصياتها، مثل سيث. تكشف الروائيتان عن احتواءهما على موضوع العنف القائم على النوع الاجتماعي، المتجذر بقوة في الأنظمة الاجتماعية والاقتصادية والثقافية، وأن بطولتهما قدرات على إظهار أنماط مختلفة من الفاعلية رغم هذا القمع الشديد. تُبرز هذه المراجعة أوجه التشابه في الطبيعة المنهجية للعنف، وتشويه الجسد، والقدرة على الصمود، والاختلافات القائمة على السياقات الاجتماعية والتاريخية المحددة. وتختتم بتحديد السبل الممكنة لإجراء بحوث مقارنة مستقبلية لاكتساب المزيد من الفهم لتأثير مختلف الأنظمة القمعية على تجربة المرأة وتعبيرها عن دورها الفاعل.

## 1. Introduction

Gender-based violence and feminine agency are key intersections of today's literary field of the study, with continuous debates of human rights, feminism, and social justice in society. The novels of Nawal El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* (1975), and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) have been key texts in this discussion, both providing an extensive understanding of how women have been oppressed with the most severe violence in different historical and cultural contexts. In her work, El Saadawi also eloquently portrays the double colonization of women in Global South countries or middle east, especially Egypt, who must maneuver in a world that is neo-colonized, patriarchal, and religious fundamentalist (Huda et al., 2023; Rather, 2025). The novel is chronologically placed in neocolonial Egypt, happening in the context of the 1952 Revolution that was aimed at breaking the colonial traditions but failing to alter patriarchal order. In the story of Firdaus, the negotiation between modernity and tradition is contradictory. Morrison, in her turn, explores the terrible heritage of slavery in the post-Civil War America, with reminisces of the Great Migration that would later change African American communities. The story by Morrison preempts the mobility, displacement, and autonomy quest that characterized this time (Ajmal et al., 2025; Ali, 2024; Sinha, 2024). This paper examines gendered based violence and female agency in these two influential novels of the past five years (Ajmal et al., 2025; Huda et al., 2023; Ali, 2024; Khan, 2023). Although an explicit, all-inclusive comparative analysis

of the two works addressing these themes are not scarce in contemporary literature, the given review will be synthesizing the findings of the respective studies of both novels. Through the analysis of the individual works, the study can identify general themes, forms of violence, and diverse forms of agency. Thus, forming a foundation for comparative scholarship that is fully integrated. The analysis will be carried out by first looking at *Woman at Point Zero*, then *Beloved*, and finally, giving a comparison of the insights to be made and giving suggestions on the direction to take in future studies.

## **2. Gender-based Violence and Female Agency in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero***

*Woman at Point Zero* is an explicit confrontation with the patriarchal structures of Arab society and the fact that it predicts the array of gendered violence against women (Istifadah & Rohmana, 2022; Khan, 2023). The main character is a woman, Firdaus, who represents dehumanization, victimization, and discrimination on a systemic level (Huda et al., 2023). However, El Saadawi changes Firdaus into a symbol of resistance by her narrative voice which shows that patriarchal violence is not accidental but rather structural, being embedded in family, religion and economy. El Saadawi claims a literary and political feminist reading that gives her work a context *in more general discussions about postcolonial agency and female independence*.

### **2.1 Manifestations of Gendered Violence**

The novel gives a graphic picture of the commodification and control of the female body by the subjugation systems (Dedha & Sinha, 2025; Sene, 2023). The life story of Firdaus is marked by several instances of gendered violence:

#### **2.1.1 Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)**

This practice is not only portrayed as something that physically abuses, but it is also an expression of other forms of structural subjugation based on patriarchy, capitalism, and the distortion of religion (Khan, 2023; Rather, 2025). It is an initial sign of Firdaus being subdued to the will of the society and her body being invaded (Rather, 2025).

The systematic character of FGM in the storyline highlights the extent to which gendered violence is entrenched, and it is a mechanism by which society exercises its power, and men gain access to the female body by means of coercion. It is the perfect example of the so-called doubled colonialism of a woman whose body turns into an arena where different forms of oppression, cultural customs, as well as economic weaknesses, confront her (Istifadah & Rohmana, 2022; Kök & Bakırtaş, 2024; Sene, 2023).

### 2.1.2 Sexual Exploitation and Prostitution

Firdaus's coerced entry into prostitution is a direct result of her economic vulnerability and social systems that do not provide women with anything better to do. This line is a demonstration of how a woman turns into an object of desire and economic means in a patriarchal society (Saniro, 2022; Sene, 2023). Further, the fact that Firdaus goes into prostitution can also be viewed as a contradictory place of oppression and a lack of control. This shift illustrates how Firdaus moves from coerced victimhood into a space where she negotiates conditional agency, reframing exploitation as a form of resistance. Although the cause of her participation lies in alienating socio-economic forces, prostitution is one of the few areas in which she can bargain with some sort of monetary independence and conditional control of her body in a highly exploitative patriarchal system (El Saadawi, 2024). Unlike her previous experiences with unpaid domestic labor and abuse, prostitution allows Firdaus to assign monetary value to her body—a commodity previously seized without her consent (Orlan Weiss, 2024). This transition highlights that such a society is hypocritical because it morally preaches against the practices of prostitutes and, at the same time, legitimizes the oppression of women in their marriage, labor, and institutions (Big-Alabo, 2023). The trajectory of Firdaus, therefore, is not only a story of sexual exploitation but also shows that the legal, economic, and social systems keep women stuck in the dependency-objectification-controlled agency loops, which are systemic (Saniro, 2022; Sene, 2023).

### 2.1.3 Physical and Psychological Abuse

Firdaus goes through many forms of abuse in her life, both with her father, husband, and pimps, which depicts the nature of violence permeating intimate relationships and the rest of society (Khan, 2023).

Violence perpetrated on Firdaus is impossible to detach from the context of psychological trauma that defines her identity and self. Since her early life experiences of being beaten by her father, to the process of getting raped by her husband and being degraded by pimps, the culture of abuse becomes normalized in the frameworks that are expected to protect her, and the culture of sexist dominance becomes sanctioned through force (El Saadawi, 2024; Khan, 2023). Such constant violence, besides causing physical injuries, generates emotional numbness, fear, and internalized oppression. The fact that Firdaus does not make complaints as she is bullied more than once is indicative of how women are socialized to accept suffering as an inherent part of being female and being a good daughter. Her experiences, finally, indicate that patriarchal violence is systematic, working both in the family, marriage, and in the marketplace, to perpetuate gender hierarchies by both corporeal force and psychological means (Khan, 2023).

#### *2.1.4 Systemic Marginalization and Deprivation*

The women in the society of Firdaus do not get an equal chance, especially in education, which fosters their oppression and restricts their agency. This lack of means strengthens their lack of power and makes them subject to exploitation (Khan, 2023). The story highlights the nature of cultural, traditional, societal, and religious ideologies converging to undermine the position of women and to control men (Sene, 2023).

### **2.2 Expressions of Female Agency**

During the excessive violence, Firdaus proves to have extraordinary agency and resistance and defies the same systems that are out to take control of her (Narimawati et al., 2024). Her character is frequently discussed as a shift of the objectification to the self-essence (Sene, 2023).

#### *2.2.1 Rebellion against Societal Norms*

The fact that Firdaus does not live up to the expectations of society, especially her denial of the old-fashioned expectations of her roles, highlights her fight to get freedom and be self-determined (Narimawati et al., 2024; Saniro, 2022). Her resistance is a strong gesture against the patriarchal hegemony that aims at silencing the female (Istifadah & Rohmana, 2022).

The struggle of Firdaus is not only a personal resistance but also a deeper analysis of the injustices in the structure that restrains women to their roles. Refusing to marry, refusing the authority of a man, and taking control of her sexuality and labor, she has an active struggle against social norms that strive to create a definition of who she is and what value she has (El Saadawi, 2024; Narimawati et al., 2024). The decisions she made, despite being rather controversial in the setting of her culture, are a radical statement of autonomy, which defies the moral and legal structures that perpetuate gendered subordination (Istifadah & Rohmana, 2022; Saniro, 2022). It is in this sense that Firdaus represents the conflict between personal freedom and social norms, which proves that the battle against patriarchal oppression may have both a symbolic and material character, and that self-determination can be restored in a world designed to deprive it.

#### *2.2.2 Reclamation of Identity*

Firdaus tries to reclaim her identity even in the worst conditions. Her aggression, which includes murder, is seen by some scholars as radical actions of agency, a last claim of control of the narration of her own body and even her death (Narimawati et al., 2024; Shafi, 2022).

The reassertion of identity is best expressed by Firdaus when she refuses to become silent or submissive to the oppression of the system. She turns into an active storyteller of her life by defying her tormentors and eventually refuses to accept the authority of the state that wants to make her nothing more than just a

criminal (El Saadawi, 2024; Shafi, 2022). Her choice to become a martyr instead of begging mercy is a way to make a final statement of independence to deny the patriarchal institutions the gratification of turning her into a penitent or shameful woman. Her rebellion, in this sense, is a manifestation of not just personal opposition but also a figurative one against the social order that commercializes and controls the female bodies (Narimawati et al., 2024). With this radicalism, Firdaus recovers the authorship of her life and death, reinventing herself as a subject rather than an object, who defines the meaning of her life by her own will.

### 2.2.3 *Firdaus plays with silence and speech*

Firdaus can negotiate her power in the framework of her circumstances by making strategic decisions in when to speak and when not to talk, thus having to negotiate her power (Sene, 2023). The final rebellious gesture when she is about to be executed can also be regarded as a strong expression of herself beyond the physical borders.

The need to master speech and silence by Firdaus depicts that agency can be exercised even in the face of severe oppression. By her choice of the time to share her experiences or to voice her viewpoints, she can make language a source of empowerment and not subjugation (El Saadawi, 2024; Sene, 2023). Her silence in the presence of those in authority is not submission; it is a deliberate refusal to be subdued, and her verbal assertion to those she challenges are moments when she defines herself and even resists. By doing so, Firdaus shows that narrative power does not depend on physical acts, but has the power to dictate her own words and silence, the power to rebuke dignity, carve her story, and establish a moral and existential independence in a world organised to clothe women in minor roles.

### 3. **Gendered Violence and Female Agency in Toni Morrison's *Beloved***

*Beloved*, by Toni Morrison, is a sharp and insightful look at how slavery has affected Black women permanently and how this is experienced in gendered violence and the various manifestations of female agency that it provokes (Ali, 2024; Khatir et al., 2022; Sinha, 2024). The novel points out how Black women were the only group of people whose bodies were used as the place of the ultimate involuntary treatment, and fighting back against slavery (Dedha & Sinha, 2025). Sethe's act of defiance—attempting to protect her children—remains central to her identity, and she lives to see Denver grow into independence. In addition to the physical and psychological violence, Morrison brings in the supernatural as the novel dimension of gendered oppression (Kumar et al., 2023). The ghost of *Beloved* represents trauma that has never been resolved and literally becomes violent with Sethe, including choking her, and this symbolizes the ongoing assault the past has on the bodies of Black

women. This spectral presence makes memory become a physical force, and it is a mix of psychological trauma and embodied violence.

### **3.1 Manifestations of Gendered Violence**

The violence in *Beloved* is complex, covering both the open brutality of slavery and its subtle psychological consequences:

#### *3.1.1 Systemic Sexual Violence*

Slave Black women were regularly raped and sexually exploited, and this degraded their bodies into reproductive and labor (Khatir et al., 2022). One of the major themes in this systematic sexual violence is that the Black female bodies are commodified, and the trauma is caused to their psychological well-being (Dedha & Sinha, 2025; Khatir et al., 2022).

#### *3.1.2 Physical Abuse and Torture*

The novel gives vivid descriptions of physical abuse and whipping, such as the use of branding as part of controlling the slaves (Sinha, 2024). Through these acts, the dehumanization of slavery is emphasized.

Outside the physical pain these whippings and branding cause to the body, they are calculated tools of psychological control. In a certain way, branding, specifically, turns the enslaved individual into property with a permanent mark that imprints ownership permanently onto the body and eliminates individuality. These kinds of violence are not necessarily punitive but symbolic, and they propagate racial hierarchies and institutional power structures that perpetuate slavery. The consistent display of torture acts also acts as an alert to the others and instills a sense of fear and subordination among the slaves. By so doing, the novel highlights the functions of physical abuse as a means of corporal punishment, as well as an ideological means, to reduce human beings to commodities and systematically deprive them of dignity, identity, and agency (Sinha, 2024).

#### *3.1.3 Separation of Families*

Forced parting of children from their mothers was a form of psychological violence, a disconnection of the basic human bond, and added to severe emotional traumas (Ali, 2024).

#### *3.1.4 Neural Trauma and Psychological Impact*

Studies that consider neurofeminist approaches to *Beloved* examine the mental and memory implications of slavery on the women involved in slavery, such as Sethe and Denver (Ajmal et al., 2025). The disjointed memories and complicated reactions to trauma are reflected in the nonlinear story structure that proves how past injustices keep causing individual pain and making it harder to rebuild identity (Ajmal et al., 2025; Ali, 2024).

### 3.2 Expressions of Female Agency

It is remarkable how the female characters in *Beloved* remain resilient in the face of the horrors that are unspeakable, and this takes place through actions that are unconventional in morality or that go against the reasoning of their oppressors (Sinha, 2024).

Memory, storytelling, and community solidarity are also forms of female agency in *Beloved* since they are subtle yet effective forms of resistance to the erasures of slavery. The controversial choices made by Sethe, as well as Denver's movement toward independence, and the spiritual leadership of Baby Suggs demonstrate that agency does not necessarily manifest itself in the form of a direct conflict but can oftentimes emerge in the form of survival, care, and provision of history (MacGowan, 2012; Sinha, 2024). In deciding to keep their memories and to talk about what slavery is trying to put them through, these women repossess narrative control over their own lives. Their actions are even bizarre to orthodox moral rules, but a desperate declaration of maternal love, dignity, and self-identification in a setup that is designed to deny them humanity. In this way, Morrison depicts female resistance not as an act of passive resistance but as a revolutionary power opposing dehumanization and recovering identity using memory and a sense of community.

#### 3.2.1 Maternal Agency and Protection

Infamous Sethe's infanticide is commonly seen not as maternal failure, but as a desperate act of maternal agency to shield her children against the dehumanizing slavery apparatus, so she does not have to subject them to the same commodification and violence she suffered (Khatir et al., 2022). Although this is a tragedy, this act declares her final authority on the destiny of her children.

#### 3.2.2 Memory Reconstruction and Identity Formation

The women in *Beloved* experience a complicated process of facing and reclaiming their past that they cannot remember to create their identities after slavery. This process of self-consciousness is essential to the healing process and agency assertion, and it can be seen through a post-colonial prism as a reversal of the mainstream discourse (Ali, 2024).

#### 3.2.3 Community and Support Networks

The relationships that Black women establish, regardless of the disturbances brought by slavery, provide some sort of collective agency. The experience that they have and how they support each other make them survive and fight against an oppressive system (Sinha, 2024).

These community and support networks form important areas of emotional, psychological, and even physical solace, and Black women can oppose the dehumanizing impact of slavery. In informal empowerment, women such as

Sethe, Baby Suggs, and Denver seek to establish empowerment systems that oppress them by sharing knowledge, providing care, and validating one another's experience (MacGowan, 2012; Sinha, 2024). These networks make it possible to exchange survival tactics, to maintain the memory of culture, and to claim the identity as the collective, which proves that it is not only an individual but a community that resists. Using such networks, Morrison emphasizes that women's solidarity will be one of the key tools of maintaining resilience, reclaiming agency, and challenging a society designed to dehumanize them.

### **3.2.4 Reconsidering Power Relations**

With their experiences, women such as Sethe redefine the concept of power, liberty, and motherhood and defy the patriarchal and racist systems that tried to deprive them of their agency (Sinha, 2024).

In regaining their power over their bodies, their decisions, and their stories, these women rebuke the traditional conceptions of power that claim authority to be a form of domination. The radical actions of Sethe, the independence-seeking behavior of Denver, and the spiritual guidance of the main character, Baby Suggs, show that power can be practiced by opposing, by providing care, and by claiming to oneself instead of traditional hierarchies (MacGowan, 2012; Sinha, 2024). Their rebalancing of motherhood and freedom shows that agency is not bound to legal or social approval, but it evolves through the power of making morally and personally relevant choices even in oppressive regimes. In this way, Morrison demonstrates power as relational and transformative, how marginalised women may upset established systems of power and establish space to maintain autonomy and dignity, and build community resiliency.

## **4. Comparative Insights**

Although they are set in two radically different socio-historical contexts, *Woman at Point Zero* and *Beloved* are characterized by some intensive similarities and fundamental differences in depicting the gendered violence and female agency.

### **4.1 Parallels**

#### *4.1.1 Systemic Nature of Violence*

In both novels, the fact that gendered violence is not only personal but also systemic in society, the economy, and culture is highlighted. In the case of El Saadawi, it is patriarchy, religious fundamentalism, and capitalism (Istifadah & Rohmana, 2022; Kök & Bakırtaş, 2024; Rather, 2025). In that of Morrison, it is the system of slavery, racial oppression, and post-emancipation systemic inequalities (Ajmal et al., 2025; Sinha, 2024).

#### 4.1.2 Commodification and Control of Bodies

Female bodies are like focal points in which oppression is played out. This is perceived in *Woman at Point Zero* by way of FGM, forced prostitution, and general objectification (Khan, 2023; Rather, 2025; Sene, 2023). Here, in *Beloved*, it manifests itself as the sexual and reproductive exploitation of enslaved women, whose bodies are literally owned and controlled by other people (Dedha & Sinha, 2025; Khatir et al., 2022).

#### 4.1.3 Resilience and Resistance

Firdaus and Sethe are both extremely resilient and agentic. Their resistance, which is usually unconventional or extreme, directly challenges the forces of oppression toward them, either by refusing to comply, engaging in violence, or using survival psychology (Narimawati et al., 2024; Shafi, 2022; Sinha, 2024).

#### 4.1.4 Trauma and Memory

This is a very widely used theme in both stories that deal with the psychological consequences of violence. It is the inability to remember and cope with trauma, which the characters experience, that makes them a central part of their identity formation and their efforts to recover agency and emphasize the perennial effect of historical injustices (Ajmal et al., 2025; Ali, 2024).

### 4.2 Divergences

In addition to these similarities, a number of differences arise between the two texts, which are related to the cultural context, agency type, and literary style.

#### 4.2.1 Context-Specific Oppression

*Woman at Point Zero* specifically critiques neo-colonial Arab patriarchal conditions, including religious fundamentalism and certain practices undertaken in Egypt, such as FGM (Khan, 2023; Kök & Bakırtaş, 2024). In contrast, *Beloved* focuses on the specific race-related violence and dehumanization of the American South, and the further problems of freedom and identity among the Black people (Ali, 2024; Sinha, 2024).

#### 4.2.2 Agency Types

The agency in Firdaus is usually characterized by personal defiance and an extreme statement of self against the social norms, which can result in crimes (Narimawati et al., 2024). The agency of Sethe is often viewed in terms of strong maternal protection and the desire to define freedom and family in the experience of the long-lasting trauma of slavery (Khatir et al., 2022).

#### 4.2.3 Intersectionality of Oppression

Although *Woman at Point Zero* briefly mentions the economic marginalization of women, *Beloved* directly previews the intersection of race and gender by demonstrating how Black women are subject to compound oppression, unlike other marginalized populations (Sinha, 2024).

This intersectional prism shows that the subjugation of black women in *Beloved* is multidimensional, comprising the heritage of slavery, institutionalized racism, and gender-based oppression to create special vulnerabilities and limitations. They are exploited in terms of their labor, commodified in terms of their bodies, and often silenced in terms of their voice, which constitutes a compound of marginalization as opposed to men, or women of other races or social classes (MacGowan, 2012; Sinha, 2024). These overlapping systems of oppression are foregrounded to highlight the fact that race and gender are not to be discussed separately to examine power relations and social injustice through the novel. The depiction of Morrison emphasizes that the struggles of Black women are determined by a combination of the systems of domination, and their resistance can only be interpreted in the framework of the intricate structure of intersectional forces.

#### **4.2.4 The Supernatural Interview**

One of the major differences is the position of the supernatural. In *Beloved*, Morrison uses ghostly violence in the form of a metaphor that conveys the residual impacts of slavery where the trauma takes a physical form and proceeds to haunt the living. *Woman at Point Zero*, in its turn, is rooted in the testimonial realism, as it depicts the systemic patriarchal violence without any supernatural resources. This contrast shows the way in which both authors express oppression: haunting memory by Morrison, severe social criticism by El Saadawi (Suresh Kumar & Daves, 2020; Swarnkar & Kumar, 2021).

### **5. Conclusion**

*Women at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison are two mighty literary manifestos of feminine violence as widespread as it is and the soul of long-standing female agency. Although set in different socio-historical and cultural contexts, one of them is a critique of neo-colonial Egyptian patriarchy, and the other is a critique of the barbarity and consequences of American slavery, both novels share valuable perspectives on the effects of systemic oppression on women's bodies, minds, and lives. Both writers shed light on the fact that violence is very much ingrained in the dominant social, economic, and cultural structures that result in the commodification and domination of female bodies. At the same time, Firdaus and Sethe, their main characters, are incredibly resilient and use a variety of different forms of agency, including open resistance and self-assertion, as well as desperate maternal instinct and the painful process of memory recovery.

A more definite use of the intersectionality theory on both of the texts in the future can be highly helpful in examining how the situation of being a double-colonized in the narration by El Saadawi is similar or different in comparison with the situation of racial and gender discrimination in the novel by Morrison. This would reveal common trends of vulnerability and distinctive methods of

resistance in various repressive situations. Moreover, the symbolic meaning of the word silence and the word speech as the agency tool, as it is pointed out in some interpretations of *Woman at Point Zero*, might be furthered on *Beloved* to expose subtle resistance. The lessons obtained in those pieces of literature can be priceless in comprehending gender-based violence as a complex crisis that must be approached with criticism and advocacy.

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