“Woman at Point Zero” is a tragedy by Nawal El Saadawi, set in the late 20th Century, that explores the intersection of gender inequality, oppression, and how gender is a deciding factor in class systems. The book is the story of Firdaus, a woman on death row in the Qanatir prison, for killing her pimp who tried to take advantage of her. It tells Firdaus’ life story, from her early childhood in a village, to her life as a prostitute in Cairo, and her eventual incarceration for murder. Through these phases of her life, Firdaus has several experiences that reinforce the notion that the female gender will always be subhuman. The novel is a powerful critique of patriarchy in Egypt, and worldwide, and the ways in which it oppresses women. “Woman at Point Zero” through Firdaus explores how gender is a large part of identity, especially in a patriarchal society.

Firdaus struggles to establish her identity throughout her story, and in fact, the transitionary periods in her life coincide with her attempts to define her identity herself and emancipate herself from society’s definition of her. By birth, she was a lower-class citizen, but because she was educated, she was middle class. Her stylists and style of make-up marked her as an upper-class citizen (Chapter 2, Pg. 10). Despite these paradoxes, she perceived herself as “only a successful prostitute” by the end of her life.

Most people’s first attempt to establish their identities are linked to their family – either they strive to break away like Nwoye and Okonkwo did in *Thing Fall Apart*, or they ground their identity in their family’s like Soma from the Diarra family (*Yeelen)*. Firdaus does not have the opportunity to do either because she struggles to even discern who her family is (Chapter 2, pages x – x+i). Her father is a hyper-religious but hypocritical and abusive peasant farmer who cared nothing for her or the ideals of Islam. In her own words, she found it difficult to tell her father from the other men and had to ask her mother if she had a father. Page 15 provides deeper insight into Firdaus’ feeling about her family, where she feels she was living in a home with parents who were not hers.

It would be a mistake to say Firdaus’ family had no impact on her