*Woman at Point Zero* (El Saadawi, 1981) by Nawal El Saadawi is a tragedy that explores the intersection of gender inequality and oppression and how gender is a deciding factor in class systems. The novel tells the story of Firdaus, a woman on death row for killing her pimp. Throughout her life, Firdaus has had several experiences reinforcing the notion that the female gender will always be subhuman. The novel, 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 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 make-up style marked her as an upper-class citizen (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 as Nwoye and Okonkwo (Achebe, 2021), or they ground their identity in their family like Soma from the Diarra family (Cisse, 1986). Firdaus cannot do either because she struggles to discern who her family is (Chapter 2, pages 11 – 18). Her father is a hyper-religious but abusive peasant farmer who cares nothing for her or the ideals of Islam. She found it difficult to tell her father from the other men and had to ask her mother if she had a father (Page 12). Page 15 provides deeper insight into Firdaus' feelings about her family, where she feels she was living in a home with parents who were not hers. This lack of belonging inspires contempt in Firdaus for what her parents believed in, which shows her despise for the men she sees in the newspapers praying to Allah (Page 27).

Firdaus' confusion thickens after she gets married and runs back home after Sheikh Mahmoud has beaten her (Page 46). Her aunt tells her that it is an expectation that pious men beat their wives despite the teachings of Islam, another paradox in Firdaus' life. Once again, Firdaus' identity is defined by someone else, and she is forced to be subservient to a physically abusive man because society expects it. On her return to the sheikh's house, he hammers in the notion that she is his property because she had been given to him. Firdaus gives in and tolerates his abuse until an awful day when she needs to run away.

Firdaus does not run to her uncle like she did the other time because she would have been going from one abuser to another. She wanders the streets and ends up in Bayoumi's café. Bayoumi is a nice guy with whom Firdaus feels safe and secure. He sounds genuinely concerned about Firdaus' plight and takes her in, treating her much better than any man ever had (Pg. 50) until she attempts to assert an identity for herself. She intends to get a job because she has an education. This was a temporary realization of her self-worth – she was more than a housekeeper or wife. She was educated. Like all the other men in Firdaus' life, Bayoumi abuses her for her thoughts of independence.

Throughout "Woman at Point Zero," Firdaus' attempts to establish her identity is met with violence. She is consistently forced into roles and expectations a patriarchal society sets, from being a wife to a physically abusive man to being a prostitute for men's pleasure. Her attempts to break free from these roles and define herself are met with violence, reinforcing the idea that society will always see her as subhuman. What is interesting, however, is how the different incidents where Firdaus' identity is quashed are portrayed. When Firdaus attempts to break free from her family's expectations, she is met with disdain and contempt. When she tries to assert her independence and get a job, she is beaten by the man who had taken her in. In contrast, when Firdaus attempts to escape her abusive husband, she is met with kindness and compassion by Bayoumi, who takes her in and treats her well until she attempts to assert her independence. These differing reactions highlight the complexity of patriarchy and how it can manifest in different ways, even within the same society.

All-in-all *Woman at Point Zero* is a well-written novel that explores the intersection of gender inequality and oppression and how gender is a deciding factor in class systems. Firdaus' attempts to establish her identity throughout the story are met with violence, highlighting the complexity of patriarchy and its various manifestations. The novel is a critique of the patriarchy in Egypt and worldwide and how it oppresses women. Firdaus' story is a reminder that gender is a large part of identity, especially in a patriarchal society.

References

Achebe, C. (2021). Things fall apart. Langara College.

El Saadawi Nawāl. (1983). Woman at point zero. Zed Books.

Yeelen. (1986). Retrieved April 10, 2023.