



**THE DILEMMAS OF WOMANHOOD AND BELONGING IN A PATRIARCHAL
SOCIETY: A STIWANIST ANALYSIS OF SELECTED RADICAL FEMALE
AFRICAN NOVELS**

By

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DECLARATION

I, Mavundadavhi Ronewa Cherity, declare that the research study titled: The dilemmas of womanhood and belonging in a Patriarchal Society: A Stiwanist analysis of Selected Radical Female African Novels is my original work. I further declare that this study has not been submitted to any other institution.

Signature Mavundadavhi RC

Date 2025/05/27

DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to my family.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I thank God for making this study possible. I thank my supervisors, Professor Olufemi Abodunrin and Ms. Mishumo Nephawe. Your patience and love have given me the courage to complete this study. Thank you for believing in me and my dreams. I would also like to thank the Department of English, Media Studies and Linguistics and the University of Venda's Research and Ethics Committee for permitting me to conduct this study. It was a privilege to use the University of Venda library resources, as I could dive deeper into my research with confidence.

ABSTRACT

This study thoroughly examined how African women writers reinterpreted and reshaped the concepts of womanhood and belonging in environments influenced by patriarchal beliefs. Based on the theoretical framework of STIWANISM (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa), the study examined two chosen texts: *Woman at Point Zero* (1983) by Nawal El Saadawi and *The Girl with the Louding Voice* (2020) by Abi Daré. These novels were analysed using Stiwanism theory and revealed the psychological and socio-economic effects of systemic gender-based oppression. This study showed how patriarchal systems operated to marginalise and silence women through institutions such as society, family, religion, and government, while also enforcing strict gender roles that limited their womanliness. The selected texts highlighted African women's overlapping challenges in their search for identity, purpose, and belonging through the protagonists' transitions from voicelessness to empowerment. *Woman at Point Zero* (1983) illustrated a bold rejection of patriarchal authority by refusing to conform, while *The Girl with the Louding Voice* (2020) exemplified the empowering influence of education and vocal self-expression in defeating patriarchal oppression. The study confirmed that the goals and objectives were effectively achieved. It was determined that educational access, financial autonomy, and regaining voice were vital tools for breaking patriarchal standards and fostering a renewed sense of belonging for African women in their communities and elsewhere.

Keywords: Womanhood, Patriarchy, Stiwanism, *Woman at Point Zero*, *The Girl Louding Voice*

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CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

1.1 Introduction

This study is a Stiwanist reading of two selected novels, *Woman at Point Zero* (1983) by Nawal El Sadaawi and *The Girl with the Louding Voice* (2020) by Abi Daré, which explore representations of challenges of womanhood and belonging in an African patriarchal society. Female protagonists in these selected texts are radicals to the extent that they become powerful tools to fight the images of Black womanhood in patriarchal societies. According to Banda (2006), African women have much to contribute to society, and humanity as a whole risks significant loss if women continue to face marginalisation and exclusion. Both men's and women's lives will improve if women have freedom and better employment opportunities. Therefore, it is essential to confront various systems of privilege and forms of oppression that seek to limit women's agency, portray them as inferior to men, and undermine their lives, livelihoods, and contributions to society.

Recent literature indicates that women are increasingly challenging male dominance and making strides in previously male-dominated professions and other areas where they have historically been marginalised. Limiting women's power, agency, and freedom is unjust, especially for African families, because the survival of low-income families on the African continent largely depends on the strategies adopted by women. Women's crucial roles have enabled many children to survive, attend school, and acquire essential life values. Consequently, all oppressive systems that undermine women and marginalise their interests should be actively challenged. The depth of brutishness that we see today is not what human life needs to be about. By concentrating on the actions of women and men, many men often overlook the social connectedness and equality between the genders. Their perceptions and beliefs about women are shaped by biased social systems and values that unjustly regard women and their roles as inferior to those of men (Thiam, 1986).

Banda (2006) mentions that a society possessing power and the freedom to live one's life and make personal choices in all aspects is a fundamental human right essential for reducing unmet needs. Unfortunately, many women have long faced the denial of such autonomy and continue to lead lives where their agency is restricted as others control them. There is substantial evidence of the underestimation of the power of African women who have been oppressed. Historically, women's voices have been silenced in critical areas; they have not had the opportunity or space to express their thoughts, fears, and hopes regarding labour, reproduction, and sexuality. In contrast, men's voices have remained prominent in both private and public spheres, where women's voices have been suppressed. Men have unjustly wielded power to speak for women, control their lives, and make decisions on their behalf as if women were incapable of making their own choices (Segalo, 2013)

According to Klausen (2015), the silencing of women's voices concerning their reproductive and productive capabilities highlights how society has perpetuated male privilege while devising means to strip women of their subjectivity regarding experiences, desires, and needs. Men's ongoing control over women whom they treat as 'others' must be challenged because these 'others' are whole human beings with rights that deserve recognition. The power exerted by men over women's lives has not only caused suffering but has also obscured women's vital contributions. The critical role of South African women in society, as evidenced during various global liberation struggles, is all-encompassing and inherently proactive. Thus, the continued restriction and undervaluation of women's power and roles reveal deep-seated prejudice and discrimination against them in society that must be confronted.

Patriarchal normativity has created and continues to sustain the severe exploitation and injustice against women. Patriarchal normativity, explored in greater detail later, arises from a socially constructed system of ideas, expectations, rules, customs, and practices established by patriarchy over time, which have come to be accepted as the norm in various aspects of life, often

beyond questioning. As a result of this patriarchal normativity, the social construction of women's roles and positions in society has generally suffered from a lack of recognition and value. Patriarchal normativity has been profoundly oppressive to women, denying them a positive identity and the fulfilment of self (Ifechelobi, 2014).

In response to the various forms of oppression, abuse, exploitation, and discrimination faced by women, feminism has emerged as a movement aimed at safeguarding and advancing the interests of women. African feminisms, particularly Stiwanism, argue that women's interests and needs are essential components of human rights that must not be overlooked or diminished (Ifechelobi, 2014). Stiwanism focuses more on the structures that oppress continental African women and the ways in which these women react to the structures. African feminists such as Ogundipe-Leslie try to highlight and challenge patriarchal norms through literature. Mama (2001) expresses significant concerns about how contemporary patriarchies in Africa try to limit women and hinder them from achieving their potential beyond their set traditional roles as diligent income-earning wives and mothers. This emphasises the necessity of confronting the oppressive nature of patriarchal normativity if women are to lead more fulfilling lives.

Feminist fiction authored by women has played an essential role in advocating for women's rights and advancing their interests. It increasingly confronts the inaccurate and misguided portrayals of women, womanhood, and femininity, particularly those put forth by male authors, while redefining women's roles within society. Scholars in feminist studies have critically examined how representations of women in male-authored literature often neglect the authentic needs and concerns that matter most to women. A significant misrepresentation by men is the tendency to diminish women's agency in society (Ait Bbiha & Barhoun, 2024).

Critical Feminist voices have significantly redefined the concept of womanhood and belonging. Feminist scholars continue challenging the notion of a universal female experience, emphasising the diversity of women's lives. Simone de

Beauvoir's groundbreaking work *The Second Sex* (1949) argues that women are not born but are shaped by societal structures and expectations. Beauvoir (1949) notes that women have been oppressed for generations. Their human rights have been ignored, and they have been viewed as an inferior social class, with their tasks limited to household chores and childbirth. Nobody is born a woman since femininity occurs after childhood, puberty, and adolescence. It takes time to unlearn something that has been taught throughout the years. It is a vicious cycle of failure, success, and relearning. Some of the pioneering feminist philosophers who have helped to redefine womanhood and belonging are Amina Mama, Ifi Amadiume and Oyeronke Oyewumi.

Patriarchal assumptions have often shaped the portrayal of women in fiction by male authors. Male authors have protested both the real and literary mistreatment and misrepresentation of women, asserting that women have the right to engage equally with men in all areas of life (Kadhim, 2018). Furthermore, Ronquist (2015) has criticised literary works that emphasise patriarchal ideals featuring a strong male hero, an evil female witch, and a submissive young woman. African feminist scholars such as Rudo Gaidzanwa, Amina Mama, Laretta Ngcobo, Yvonne Vera, and Tsitsi Dangarembga, have all questioned the marginalised status of women both in society and literature through their writing.

Additionally, Ngcobo (1985) points out that women continue to struggle to gain admission into the greater society, an injustice that has inspired many female writers to confront the socially constructed marginalisation of women in their works. Two decades ago, Flora Nwapa (1998) examined the representation of women in literature by African men. She discovered that a few have attempted to present an objective image of women that reflects their societal roles. She further argues that in African literature, male authors have presented female characters from their perspectives, leading to a distinction between the African male writer and his female counterpart.

African feminists argue that not all literature honours and promotes the interests of women. Some have criticised literature on African women that has typically

assessed the quality of life primarily through educational attainment, access to paid employment, and availability of modern amenities like hospitals, transportation, piped water, and schools (Aina, 1998). They contend that focusing on women's access to these amenities overlooks whether improvements in their circumstances come from their husbands and fathers or their efforts. Women must be able to participate fully and not be marginalised or excluded in nearly all aspects of social life that contribute to a more fulfilling existence. This is the focus of the analysis in the selected texts of this study.

Analysing representations of women's agency through women's literature is a valid response to criticisms directed at men's literature. Mavengano (2024) asserts that African women are often portrayed in ways that reflect patriarchal norms, leading to their marginalisation, misrepresentation, and distortion of their needs and identities. A culture of oppression can only be transformed into one of liberation when the oppressed take action to create alternatives for themselves. It also advocates for women writers to rewrite women's experiences from their perspectives. This ensures that men do not speak for women and women are not misrepresented in ways that reinforce patriarchal views. Ifechelobi (2014) adds that to challenge the dominant rituals and patriarchal structures controlling women's lives, better imaginaries are needed in the African context to counter male depictions that negate women. This further underscores this study's relevance as it focuses on feminist literature by women writers. This includes various forms of exploitation, recuperating the voice and agency of oppressed subjects, and displaying agency and intellectual authority over one's actions.

Elaine Showalter (1985), a leading feminist literary theorist, has been influential in advancing literary criticism that prioritises women's perspectives. She argues that feminist criticism should be built upon analytical frameworks drawn from women's lived realities rather than relying on male-dominated theoretical traditions. Hassan and muhammad (2020) affirms that gynocriticism seeks to create critical methods that capture and represent female experiences. This theory is applied in literary practice, showing that women writers often adopt a deliberately feminist stance

that incorporates ideologies directly opposing patriarchal structures within Western culture. Through this deliberate positioning, their narratives foreground women's experiences and serve to reveal gender inequalities that are frequently ignored in works authored by men (Hurley-Powell, 2019). This focus on authenticity is also evident in African women's literature. African women writers view their craft as a form of self-realisation and empowerment rather than as mere fictional storytelling. Their creative process is deeply personal and self-referential. It functions as a form of therapy that affirms and validates the lived realities of African women. In doing so, they transform personal experience into a source of both authenticity and authority in their literary expression, challenging dominant cultural narratives that have historically marginalised women's voices .

Feminist scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf and Judith Butler have contended that literature has gained significant importance in gender studies, as writers utilise it as a vital tool for social analysis to address gender imbalances. Woolf (1929) acknowledges this essential role of literature and urges women writers to redefine female identities beyond patriarchal constraints. She argues that for women to see themselves as second-class citizens would wrongly align themselves with the external images presented by others in society rather than with their internal experiences. This highlights how women's literature can help reclaim women's identities from the misrepresentations of patriarchal norms by articulating their concerns and needs from a female perspective. Thus, literature created by women serves as a crucial means for advancing women's concerns. These perspectives position the current study as significant, placing women's literary contributions at the heart of its inquiry to facilitate social transformation (Ifechelobi, 2014).

1.2 Research Problem

According to Bartholomaeus and Tarrant (2016), the concept of womanhood is redefined and shaped by idealised discourses of femininity and gender stereotypes across decades. Alternative definitions of womanhood have received less attention, based on discourses and practices of personal freedom and self-identity.

Literature has extensively portrayed the harmful effects of traditional gender roles on women, showing how cultural norms can push them towards ruin. These artistic and patriarchal expectations deeply influence women's lives, restricting their ability to act independently and reach their full potential. They mention that African women must adhere to limited and burdensome roles, stifling their identities, voices, and goals. The results of these expectations have wide-ranging impacts, such as stifled identities, restricted educational and career opportunities, violence and exploitation and feelings of self-doubt. Radical African women in the selected novels defy these assumptions, rejecting the limitations of patriarchal standards.

African women also resist and defy expectations by fighting back, reclaiming their voices, challenging patriarchal norms, empowering themselves and proudly embracing their identities. Therefore, this study contributes to research on legitimising radical ways of resisting and defying patriarchal assumptions. This involves African women fighting for radical transformation against patriarchy and any male-favoured systems. Including living their lives as they see fit. These patriarchal approaches challenge limitations, as they are seen as excluding men and as forms of male-bashing. This is due to what McFadden (1999) refers to as the need for collaboration that African women often feel they need with African men, as they share a political standing despite these men being their biggest aggressors.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

1.3.1 Aim of the Study

The study examines the rewriting of the concept of womanhood and belonging in a new radical African context as depicted in a selection of African female novels.

1.3.2 Study Objectives

- a) To examine how the selected texts portray the dilemmas of womanhood in a patriarchal African society

- b) To explore how the experiences of female protagonists reflect and challenge gender roles, expectations and systems of oppression
- c) To analyse the psychological and socio-political danger of gendered oppression as depicted in the selected texts
- d) To determine how female characters embrace their womanhood through education, voice and resistance in pursuit of their womanliness
- e) To encourage closer academic attention to the writings of African women, whose stories often challenge and reshape existing social narratives

1.4 Role of Theory in Study

1.4.1 Stiwanism

The Nigerian poet, critic, editor, feminist and activist Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie founded the Stiwanist theory in 1994. Stiwanism is an acronym for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa. This theory is grounded in the lived experiences of African women, aiming to empower them while educating men about gender issues. It acknowledges the absence of a singular narrative within African Feminism; as such, a perspective would overlook the rich diversity of African cultures. In contrast to Western feminism, which often applies Western frameworks, Stiwanism is tailored to address the specific challenges that women in continental Africa encounter (Nkealah, 2016).

Stiwanism has significantly contributed to understanding African gender issues, advocating for women's empowerment and addressing systemic inequalities (Ahikire, 2014). Nevertheless, Kanjere and Rachidi (2014: 1433) assert that women in male-dominated environments frequently face barriers such as insufficient structural support and policies that do not adequately incorporate women, perpetuating gender discrimination. Ahikire (2014) emphasises that Stiwanism critically analyses these challenges and connects them to broader development and inequality issues that uniquely impact African women.

Stiwanism is vital in raising awareness about women's political, social, and economic struggles in Africa, promoting human rights. Stiwanism stresses the importance of understanding women's experiences within Africa rather than from a diasporic perspective. This framework seeks to tackle the exclusion of African women from positions of power and influence. It recognises that access to resources is often influenced by gender and linked to decision-making power, making it particularly relevant for this study. With its multifaceted approach, Stiwanism advocates for a comprehensive agenda that includes women's empowerment (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994).

African feminists assert that genuine liberation from colonialism must also include the emancipation of African women. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) calls for transforming gender politics and societal structures to redefine women's identities and facilitate their liberation. However, unlike Western feminist movements, Stiwanism does not adhere to a single wave or ideology; it varies regionally throughout Africa, reflecting local realities and cultural contexts (Goredema 2010: 34-35). While other approaches of feminism might seem relevant, such as Womanism, Nego-Feminism, Motherism and Black Feminism, seeing that the female characters are versatile and even radical. Stiwanism is more relevant and therefore chosen for its transformative approach, believing that a society excluding men's ability to change does not speak truth to African values.

Stiwanism is appropriate for examining the selected texts as it highlights the importance of women's roles in social change while respecting African cultural contexts. This theory tackles the systemic issues that African women encounter, including gender disparity, economic exploitation, and cultural customs that ostracise them, which are pivotal to the conflicts illustrated in these novels. It acknowledges the intersectionality of oppression, understanding that African women face discrimination not only based on gender but also influenced by race, class, and cultural elements. Stiwanism supports the modification of traditions instead of completely dismissing them, making it pertinent for comprehending how cultural standards affect women's experiences.

It also encourages partnership with men in pursuing gender equality, providing a perspective to investigate how male figures in the novels either support or contest patriarchal structures. The theory's emphasis on tangible change, such as enhancing access to education, economic prospects, and legal rights, aligns with the protagonists' attempts to resist and manoeuvre through patriarchal limitations. By confronting the real experiences of African women, such as domestic violence, exploitation, and restricted access to resources, Stiwanism offers a lens for comprehending the difficulties and routes to empowerment illustrated in these works.

1.5 Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach rooted in an interpretive and feminist paradigm, specifically drawing from the STIWANIST framework (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa). By working within this paradigm, the study seeks to understand the lived experiences of women as portrayed in African literature, while critically engaging with the social, cultural, and historical forces that shape their realities. The feminist interpretive lens allows for an in-depth reading of the texts, where meaning is constructed through the perspectives of female characters and their responses to patriarchal systems.

The research focuses on *Woman at Point Zero* (1983) by Nawal El Saadawi and *The Girl with the Louding Voice* (2020) by Abi Daré. These two novels present radical and transformative narratives of African womanhood. These texts are explored through thematic and textual analysis, allowing the study to uncover how issues of gender, identity, and belonging are woven into the stories of women navigating complex and often oppressive environments.

Data for the study is drawn from the texts themselves, through a close reading of character development, dialogue, and narrative structure. This method enables the identification of key themes such as silence and voice, female resistance, education, marginalisation, and the search for personal and social belonging. The historical and cultural settings of the novels, namely, Egypt and Nigeria, are also

considered, as they offer essential insight into the specific challenges women face within different African contexts.

By analysing the female protagonists' choices, struggles, and transformations, the study reveals the dilemmas of womanhood and belonging in African societies. STIWANISM further ensures that African women's voices and experiences remain central to the analysis, moving beyond Western feminist interpretations and highlighting the importance of contextual, culturally rooted approaches to gender in African literature.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study helps to understand that womanhood is controlled by African cultures, namely Nigerian and Egyptian cultures and their ancient ideologies (Eagly, 2009). This study challenges stereotypes and misconceptions about African women. It highlights their agency, resilience, and diverse experiences, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of African womanhood. The study also explores how African novels navigate the complexities of modernity, culture and tradition, providing insights into the cultural dilemmas faced by African women. Therefore, this study disrupts societal expectations and biases by offering a space to explore the various experiences of African women, both in private and public spheres. The structural disparities, prejudices, and power asymmetries that impact women's lives are vividly explored in this study.

Furthermore, redefining the concept of womanhood helps empower women by affirming their experiences. The study contributes to Africa's increasingly fragmented research on African women's challenges. This study aims to explore modern rewriting of the concept of womanhood by African female writers and how they write to abolish patriarchal notions and advocate a free space for women in African societies within literary discourses. The study also helps to broaden the comprehension of the literature written by African women and its impact on social and political conversations.

1.7 Ethical Considerations

This study is primarily text-based, excluding any form of human participation. However, permission was sought from the University of Venda's Department of English, Media Studies and Linguistics as well as the University's Research and Ethics Committee to conduct the study in the selected texts.

1.8 Chapter Outline

Chapter One: This chapter presents the aim of the study, study objectives, research questions, theoretical analysis and significance of the study, highlighting the difficulties that African women encounter in patriarchal societies and the methods that they employ to combat oppression. The concept of womanhood and belonging is defined to carefully readdress the challenges that African women face in a male-dominated society.

Chapter Two: This chapter examines academic articles and literature regarding womanhood in African cultures, emphasising the obstacles that women encounter within patriarchal structures. It explores topics such as gender disparity, economic exploitation, and cultural subjugation. This chapter also gives examples of related African novels that investigate comparable themes, these are: Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke* (1982), *Americanah* (2013), and *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), authored by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. These studies offer comparative perspectives on how African women manoeuvre through and challenge patriarchal systems.

Chapter Three: This chapter analyses *Woman at Point Zero* (1983) by Nawal El Saadawi, emphasising prostitution as a means of self-empowerment. It investigates how the main character, Firdaus, employs prostitution to regain control and oppose patriarchal oppression. This chapter explores the societal pressures that drive women toward prostitution and how Firdaus turns this oppressive position into a means of independence and resistance against patriarchal systems.

Chapter Four: This chapter analyses *The Girl with the Louding Voice* (2020) by Abi Daré, highlighting the ways African women oppose patriarchal gender roles and

find empowerment through education. It explores the female protagonist, Adunni's quest for self-empowerment through education in the face of societal limitations. The chapter emphasises the transformative influence of education in redefining conventional gender roles and empowering women to imagine and realise a brighter future.

Chapter Five: This chapter presents a comparative study of the selected texts. It analyses the commonalities and distinctions in the ways the main characters, Firdaus and Adunni combat patriarchal oppression and assert their own power. This chapter also examines themes including agency, societal limitations, and the influence of transformative tools like education and prostitution in attaining self-empowerment. It further explores how both texts mirror wider movements in African feminism and the changing methods of resistance.

Chapter Six: This chapter outlines the main findings of the research, highlighting how African women confront patriarchal oppression and empower themselves through various methods. It examines the consequences of these results for African feminism and literary analysis. This chapter provides suggestions for future research, including investigating additional types of resistance and empowerment in African literature and analysing how the intersection of gender, class, and culture influences women's experiences.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

For numerous years, feminist writings have emphasised elements that sustain womanhood and obstruct a complete transformation involving empowered and fully liberated women. In *Re-creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) highlights the necessity of a critical development driven by sociological, economic, and historical changes to guarantee female emancipation across Africa. In the introduction to the forementioned text, the theorist states that black women view social recognition, dignity, and the ability to act freely and live joyfully and responsibly as essential components of their liberation.

2.2 Defining Womanhood in Feminist Literary Works

In the 20th century, Simone de Beauvoir wrote within a French framework, as shown in her frequently referenced work, *The Second Sex* (1949). De Beauvoir uses an existential phenomenological perspective to uncover the intricacies of womanhood. Hekman (2015) believes that women have been characterised and confined to a historically persistent subordinate condition as the Other. Beauvoir (1949) elaborates that a complex interaction between immanence and transcendence marks human existence. De Beauvoir asserts that the ideology underpinning women is a myth created by men, through which women are assigned to a position of Otherness. Consequently, the impact of *The Second Sex* on feminist studies regarding the issue of femininity is undeniable. Feminist thinkers like Betty Friedan (1963) expanded de Beauvoir's legacy ten years later within an American framework to question the boundaries of womanhood established through patriarchal notions of marriage, domesticity, and motherhood.

Recent scholarship and intervention strategies increasingly contest the entrenched gender socialisation that channels girls into narrowly defined roles as wives and mothers. Community-based initiatives, such as the Family Talk program, actively

confront these restrictive norms by challenging gendered ideologies that pressure girls into early marriage and emphasising that contemporary society allows young people the freedom to choose their relationships (Logie et al., 2023). Such interventions not only aim to prevent forced marriages but also work to dismantle long-standing expectations surrounding femininity. In parallel, feminist theory has long critiqued how societal expectations of marriage and motherhood limit women's autonomy and potential. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's insights, Rauf et al. (2025) highlight how unmarried women are often stigmatised and point to self-doubt, shaped by patriarchal history, as a key internal barrier. This may lead women to prioritise identity over ambition in male-dominated environments.

Similarly, Adrienne Rich's feminist critique, as discussed by Peterson (2025), questions the institution of motherhood itself, exposing its male-defined structures as deeply oppressive. Rich's work underscores how idealised notions of the "good" or "perfect" mother are unrealistic constructs passed down through generations, setting mothers up for inevitable failure. She further argues that these intensive mothering ideals are socially engineered rather than natural truths, revealing the cultural roots of expectations that constrain women's lives. Bakare-Yusuf (2013) adds that a woman is inevitably linked to the marital role characterised by dependency, sexual restraint, procreation, and domestic life. These entrenched ideologies certainly benefited from the earlier-mentioned patriarchal context and therefore continue to be upheld by various institutions of patriarchal societies worldwide.

Both Bawa and Adeniyi Ogunyankin (2018) state that African feminists address the problem of patriarchal frameworks that coercively dictate ideas of womanhood, which women and girls feel pressured to embrace in their quest for genuine acceptance. In patriarchal societies, girls and women learn that marrying a man is the goal for every woman, validating her identity as a true woman. In these regards, strict measures are applied in different ways that assign women to distinct roles like conventional caregiving, homemaking, and nurturing, which are patriarchally associated with their identities as wives and mothers (Afisi, 2010). For example,

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) ironically questions the perspective that marriage signifies an accomplishment through a pointed remark. In the novel, Adichie asserts that Beatrice's life is completed by her husband, Eugene. This highlights that marrying a man is a hallmark of an ideal woman.

Segalo (2013) states that fertility characterises womanhood, and a woman's ability to be a mother also defines her womanhood. This literature review highlighted the fundamental assumptions about procreation and motherhood placed on women to validate femininity, thereby reinforcing the prescriptive and, consequently, oppressive narrative of womanhood. Consequently, critiquing these normalised beliefs that punish women for failing to comply with the socio-cultural expectations of patriarchal frameworks, Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) asserts that a woman is not regarded as genuine if she is unmarried. She is not considered human if she does not have children, specifically a son.

2.3 Prostitution as a Reflection of Female Resistance against Oppression in Stiwanist African Women's Writing

The theme of prostitution features prominently in many radical African female novels, often serving as a lens through which the social, political, and economic struggles faced by women are explored. In these narratives, prostitution is not merely a moral or social issue; it is portrayed as a complex phenomenon rooted in structural inequalities that limit women's choices in patriarchal societies. Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) presents one of the most notable depictions of this theme. The character Adaku, after being denied inheritance and basic respect within her husband's family, chooses to become a prostitute. Her decision is not framed as immoral but rather as a form of self-liberation and economic survival. By choosing prostitution over continued dependence, Adaku challenges traditional notions of womanhood and motherhood that tie a woman's identity to suffering and subservience (Akindes, 2020). This portrayal resonates with the core ideas of Stiwanism, particularly its emphasis on African women defining their own paths within society.

In *Everything Good Will Come* (2005), Sefi Atta explores how transactional sex becomes a survival mechanism in urban Nigeria. While not all characters are sex workers in the conventional sense, the novel examines how power dynamics and economic need often influence sexual relationships. The theme of prostitution, here, becomes symbolic of the limited options available to women navigating a male-dominated society. Sheri, one of the key characters, embodies this complexity. Her choices reveal both vulnerability and agency (Diakhaté, 2021). Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1981) introduces another nuanced portrayal. The character of Aissatou, although not a sex worker, embodies the same spirit of independence seen in women who reject traditional paths. Sheri, a character who appears to live outside the boundaries of marriage, uses her sexuality on her own terms. Though her choices are not labelled as prostitution, they still represent a rejection of societal expectations and a reclaiming of autonomy over her body and life.

In more recent literature, Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009) presents prostitution within the context of migration and human trafficking. The novel tells the stories of Nigerian women who are trafficked to Europe and forced into sex work. Rather than focusing only on victimhood, Unigwe presents their experiences with emotional depth and complexity. The characters reflect on their pasts, make decisions, and assert their voices despite the difficult circumstances (Mabura, 2022). The novel challenges the reader to consider how global systems of inequality contribute to the commodification of African women's bodies. What unites these narratives is their refusal to portray prostitution as simply immoral or shameful. Instead, they explore it as a response to systemic oppression, economic desperation, and patriarchal limitations. These novels demonstrate that, in many cases, prostitution is not a choice freely made, but neither is it entirely without agency. The protagonists find ways to assert control, challenge societal norms, and redefine their sense of belonging outside traditional expectations.

From a STIWANIST perspective, this literary focus is essential. The theory calls for the inclusion of African women's lived experiences, whether painful,

empowering, or contradictory, in the process of social transformation (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994). By examining the theme of prostitution in African women's writing, one can see how these authors expose the hypocrisies of society while giving voice to those often silenced or judged. Prostitution in radical female African novels is not just a recurring plot device; it is a powerful tool of critique. These works reveal the limits of patriarchal definitions of womanhood and the socio-political systems that force women into difficult decisions. Through these portrayals, African women writers challenge readers to rethink assumptions about morality, agency, and survival in contexts shaped by gender inequality.

2.4 Marginalisation of Educated African Women in Literature

According to Masha and Mogoboya (2024), the introduction of Western education resulted in a divide between black men and women. The British colonial invasion of Africa, which took place in 1884, marked the beginning of formal education. This educational system exhibited a degree of gender bias, as the colonial government preferred black men over black women for school attendance, primarily through missionaries, to facilitate communication with the indigenous populations and prepare them to assist the colonists. This training provided skills for cooks and clerks (Jaiyeola & Aladegbola, 2020). Even though the roles held by black men during that period were frequently low-level, they still offered those men a superior economic status compared to black women. As a result, African Indigenous women were placed at the lowest level of the socio-economic structure due to their limited economic independence, which stemmed from being confined to unpaid domestic work and rural agricultural activities. Since the missionary education, black women have been subjected to suffering, and Omolewa (2006) clarifies that this gap is grounded in the colonial educational system, which excluded women from economic and academic opportunities.

Hafez et al. (2023) clarify that education removes docility, passivity, and feelings of inferiority from women. The inclusion of many black men in Western educational programs led to a significant gap between literate men and illiterate women in early

colonial African communities. Makama (2013:121) notes that before the mid-20th century, patriarchal beliefs in Africa regarding gender roles led some parents to perceive education as necessary only for boys rather than girls, mainly when resources were insufficient to enrol all children in school. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) rightly identifies colonialism and neocolonialism as the primary burden on the African woman since the colonial settler brought Western education and initially barred it from the indigenous woman. To address gender inequality in education and enhance societal progress, several African countries introduced free education at various learning stages, with Nigeria being among the pioneers. In the 1950s, primary education was implemented nationwide in some regions, and in the 1970s, it was implemented nationwide.

Education and self-assertion for girls are essential for achieving ideal womanhood in the 21st century. The challenges to regulatory prescriptive norms that limit the options of African women are integral to contemporary African feminist politics. A South African feminist, Puleng Segalo (2013), contests the belief that equates womanhood solely with being female. She emphasises that being a woman is often equated with the biological aspect of being female, which carries an unspoken implication of motherhood. Moreover, various African government administrations launched more than five policy initiatives during the 1980s and 1990s. These include the 1986 Blueprint on Women's Education, the 1986 Nomadic Education Programme, and the 1991 National Commission for Mass Literacy and Non-Formal Education.

Despite these efforts and various shifts in the political and economic arenas, the 2012 Gender in African Countries like Nigeria Report indicates that among 134 nations in the Gender Equality Index, Nigeria holds the 118th position, which remains a concerning status. The previously mentioned issue frequently stems from inflexible societal systems that decline to promote women's education. Aja-Okorie (2013) states that among the 77 million children not attending school, 56% are female, and women account for two-thirds of the adult illiterate population.

While globalisation is progressively enhancing women's literacy rates in Africa, where the number of female students is rising, various challenges, such as restrictive cultural norms and patriarchal attitudes, still hinder or dissuade African women from pursuing their educational aspirations to the fullest. Women who achieve advanced qualifications and secure positions in academia, as depicted in feminist texts such as Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke* (1982) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), often face hostility that complicates their lives, leaving the unfortunate and those lacking resilience feeling oppressed. Structured higher education, which has long been inaccessible to African girls and women, has been recognised as a means of empowering women. This allows women to achieve equality, as reflected in feminist and Stiwaniist writings like those of Buchi Emecheta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

As noted by Baten et al. (2021), education serves as a means for women to liberate themselves from the constraints of a patriarchal culture rooted in male supremacy. The advantage that novelists gain from obtaining higher education or exposure to universities has facilitated their development of female characters who demonstrate that education fosters progressive and equal perspectives on life. Most importantly, Adu-Gyamfi and Osei-Egyir (2023) highlighted that education enhances women's assertiveness. However, this does not imply that all women with university or college education stop being victims of gender bias, as other factors contribute to the marginalisation of women.

Rydström and Gill (2008) indicate that although female school enrolment and employment have improved, disparities remain fuelled by customs and outdated traditions that marginalise women. These transformations were primarily triggered by the dissolution of structured colonialism, resulting in the participation of women in numerous political and social areas, alongside the rise in women attending universities and working outside the household. Although *Double Yoke* and *Purple Hibiscus* take place during the mid to late 20th century and Americanah (2013) occurs between the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the writers illustrate education as a means of liberation for women across time.

While education can empower women, the hesitance of certain societies to embrace this change presents a challenge. For example, in *Double Yoke*, with Miss Bulewa, several students at the University of Calabar recognise the difficulties new women in Nigeria encounter in creating new identities, particularly when they wish to remain connected to their traditional roles. Reem and Haifa (2020) articulate that cultural viewpoints and ideologies play a role in shaping the identities of African women. Using Dr. Edet as an illustration, Nko and her friends recognise that women frequently impose this weight on themselves, thus becoming their own obstacles.

According to Kwachou (2020), education is a double-edged sword that fosters independent thinking and provides various choices for women. The character Mrs. Nwaizu states that women must remember that pioneers like Dr. Edet paved the way for them. They laboured diligently to attain their academic roles and continue to wish to be regarded as the foundations of tradition (*Double Yoke*, 1982:102). Mrs. Nwaizu urges the young women to recognise that individuals like Dr. Edet exemplify the potential for African women to thrive in various roles that frequently conflict with each other. Bueskens (2018) describes this complex duality as the reason for widespread contradictions in women's lives in contemporary society. The difficulties faced by a well-educated woman who also values her femininity stem from society's persistence in upholding patriarchal beliefs in a socio-culturally, economically, and politically evolving environment.

2.5 Critical Discussion on Womanhood in African Novels by Female African Authors

In *Double Yoke* (1982), Miss Bulewao and Dr. Edet play a crucial role in exploring womanhood by examining higher education as both a means of transformation and a challenge to patriarchy. Masha and Magoboya (2024) agree that much of Emecheta's work emphasises the importance of education and self-determination for African women striving for their identity and freedom. In the novel, Miss Bulewao is presented as a new lecturer who articulates her discussions of reform,

detailing what she wishes to be done and undone at the university and in Nigeria (*Double Yoke*, 1982). Her educational background can be traced to her attentive perspective and sociopolitical reasoning (Masha & Magoboya, 2024).

Emecheta (1983) notes that in the early 1980s, a black woman like Miss Bulewao, who exhibited characteristics commonly seen as masculine, like being vocal, assertive, self-assured, and confident, was still uncommon in Nigeria. Bhana (2016) also claims that reputable femininities are often created by linking them to nonsexual identities, which in turn restricts women's sexual freedom. Socialisation conveys to both men and women that being self-assertive jeopardises femininity, especially since being firm does not align with hegemonic masculinity when exhibited by women. Instead, female non-subordination threatens male dominance (Folberg et al., 2022).

In literary works, the concept of womanhood relates to a wife and requires the regulation of women's bodies and their sexual expression. Doğru and Çöker (2024) outline the history of institutional sexual regulation and the restriction of sexuality to marital reproduction. Sexuality was meticulously restricted and shifted into the household. The marital family took charge of it and integrated it into the critical role of reproduction. They further discuss the socially and culturally accepted discourse surrounding procreative marital sex that underpins the concept of respectable womanhood. Anell (2023) argues that sexual activity outside of marriage was seen as a deviant behaviour that deserved punishment. This suggests that sexuality was designated for reproduction within marriage due to the broader context that essentialises women in the roles of marriage and motherhood. Therefore, in support of the concept of an ideal woman, it was anticipated that women would undertake these roles not out of preference but as dictated by their biological nature. This also echoed the enforced restriction of women to the home, while men, their spouses, were seen as more appropriate for the public domain.

Hurner (2006) states that in the private domain where womanhood resides, roles like wife and mother were perceived as inherent and unavoidable for women's bodies. Women's involvement in the public sphere was restricted due to the

perceived danger that a natural woman might present to the moral and social order. Muthukumar (2022) explains that this condition required actions that prevented women from entering the public domain to avoid distracting men with their immoral bodies. Excluding women aims to maintain the principles of womanhood. The public sphere, viewed as a natural environment ruled by lustful, amoral, competitive, and ambitious males, was deemed unsuitable for women better suited to the private domain. Consequently, women's absence from the public realm compelled them to remain as continual dependents of men.

Carole Pateman's (1988) theory of the sexual contract uncovers how patriarchal power is embedded in what appear to be neutral or universal social systems. While it presents itself as part of the broader idea of freedom associated with the social contract, the sexual contract actually establishes a framework where men are granted authority over women. Particularly in terms of sexual access, where women are denied the power to withhold consent. This arrangement makes the subordination of women a core element of civil society, rather than a side effect (Baskan and Alkan, 2023). Building on Pateman's original ideas, more recent scholars have applied the concept to contemporary contexts. Initially tied to historical marriage and labour contracts in early modern Western societies, the theory has been expanded using insights from thinkers like Foucault (1994) and his ideas on biopolitics and disciplinary power (Khairunnisa et al., 2024). These newer interpretations argue that sexual contracts have adapted under neoliberal systems, continuing to uphold male dominance under the appearance of progress and gender equality.

In *The Sexual Contract*, Pateman (1988) examines the societal enforcement of male dominance that reinforced specific notions of women, which demanded marriage. She explains how the establishment of a sexual contract not only allowed for the ongoing minority status of women but also facilitated men's control over women's sexuality in patriarchal Western societies. A sexual contract was formed that granted all men unrestricted rights over women's bodies and sexualities. The ongoing control of women and their sexuality was established in

their parental homes as daughters and in their marital homes as wives. This implied that women could not live as individuals but, out of necessity, needed enduring relationships with men for support.

Krolokke and Sorensen (2006) state that the feminist movement questioned societal structures established by patriarchy that required women to be restricted to the home. To put it differently, characterising womanhood through marriage, home life, and motherhood benefited men and consequently bolstered the subjugation of women within patriarchal societies. These feminists challenged the notion that women are still inherently meant to marry, bear children, and create a home, just as men were perceived to be suited for the public realm. The writings of Simone de Beauvoir and other referenced feminist literary works have been used to demonstrate a necessity for research. They emphasised patriarchal definitions of womanhood; therefore, they offer an excellent framework for positioning an argument regarding the challenges of womanhood and belonging in a patriarchal environment.

2.6 Examining Marriage and Femininity in African novels by African Authors in the 21st Century

Stiwanism acts as a vehicle for social transformation and fights for economic change essential for promoting womanhood in Africa. For example, Adichie employs the character Ifeoma in *Purple Hibiscus* to illustrate this concept of financial independence (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994:1). This is supported by Masha and Magoboya (2024) in their article titled *A Stiwanist analysis of female figures of academia in Emecheta and Adichie's selected novels*. When Ifeoma's father, Papa Nnukwu, informs her that his spirit advocates for her, hoping Chukwu will provide a good man to care for her and the children to alleviate their financial burdens, Auntie Ifeoma instead requests that he pray for the quickening of her promotion to senior lecturer (*Purple Hibiscus*, 2003:83). Papa Nnukwu symbolises early generations that firmly hold the belief that a man must provide for a woman and children, reflecting the patriarchal views that diminish women's ability to lead their

families. The character, Ifeoma, understands that a job promotion would lead to an improved salary, alleviating their financial pressures, so she chooses to ensure her family's financial stability independently rather than relying on a man's support.

The character Ifeoma embodies the African woman who does not remarry or take a partner, prioritising the advancement of their career instead (Wienclaw, 2011). This contrasts with Adichie's female characters, who tend to marry too young or leave school to become graduate wives subservient to their husbands (*Purple Hibiscus*, 2003:54). Consequently, Ifeoma's choice for economic independence symbolises Stiwanist support for African women to reject patriarchal notions that could be advantageous, like financial recklessness (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994). Marriage continues to be a crucial requirement for the continuation of life in African communities. In her article *Marriage is a Scary Trend: Narratives of Fear of Marriage for Women*, Putri (2025) claims that marriage is a crucial element of human social requirements, enabling the establishment of local community units. According to belief systems, marriage has spiritual value in addition to meeting social requirements because it shields people from sin related to adulterous sexual cravings.

Marriage, a long-standing social institution, has changed in meaning and perception in modern-day society. According to Geertz's (2017) *The Interpretation of Cultures*, their culture greatly influences people's perceptions of marriage. He asserts that culture offers a deep symbolic framework for understanding social events. Marriage and people are inevitably dependent on the webs of meaning they create. Marriage is seen as the ideal life aim for creating new social communities, despite its function in maintaining social and spiritual stability. But it is also linked to tension, anxiety, fear, and even rejection, especially for women. Women's greater involvement in public life has caused them to reassess their viewpoints, which has affected how important they believe marriage to be.

During the bride price, also known as 'lobola' in African cultures, both families of the groom and the bride speak words that align with society's desires and honour the ancestors. Hence, they do not disappoint those who adhere to that specific

tradition. Whittaker et al. (2025) believe that the influence of patriarchy on African women's thinking has led them to believe that obedience to men is a form of respect. The refusal of patriarchy is essentially a refusal of men; women cannot reject patriarchy and still fit into society. The women mentoring the young women educate them on the proper behaviour of a woman, mainly as a wife, to satisfy her spouse. The newly married bride must learn to separate herself from single women. During the wedding ceremony, families and wise women reinforce the teachings and encourage the bride to let go of any thoughts that may prevent her from obeying her husband.

Additionally, she mentions that a married African woman receives a fresh set of respectful words and titles to address those in her husband's family. The bride is introduced to these unfamiliar names after being informed of a new dress code that fully covers her. Additionally, failure to adhere to the new names and dress code is seen as a lack of respect for the family and ancestors, as many names are connected to the ancestors. The guidance provided to a newlywed bride differs from that of the groom, as the woman is believed to enter her new family to create a cosy home for everyone. This duty can only be fulfilled if the wife is obedient and modest towards her husband and his family members. The bride has no time to enjoy the ceremony as the wedding is focused on the two families rather than her personal experience (Whittaker et al., 2025).

One underlying cause of women's discrimination and marginalisation is the societal expectation that they should prioritise marriage and motherhood over education and careers. This expectation reinforces a cycle of gender inequality and restricts women's opportunities. However, Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (2000) offers hope for Nigerian women by emphasising the importance of developing new ideas and concepts to challenge oppressive systems. By redefining their identities, African women can resist interconnected forms of oppression and break free from controlling stereotypes. Through the lens of *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), it becomes evident that African women seek respect and equality, not the disdain of men.

2.6.1 Exploring the weight of patriarchal expectations on African wives

Putri (2025) lists the responsibilities of a wife as being related to marriage, home life and socialising. If a wife fails to fulfil her duties, her husband has the right to divorce her, leading to the end of the marriage. The wife's primary responsibility in marriage is to remain loyal to her husband and engage in sexual relations with only him. The wife is also responsible for preparing meals, doing laundry for the entire family, fetching water, caring for the children, collecting firewood, and maintaining the house's cleanliness. Additionally, the cleanliness of a home reflects the wife's character and the teachings she learned from her mother. In Zulu culture, the obligation of the wife is to show complete reverence to the kraal and its vicinity, believed to be the dwelling place of the family's ancestors. Failure to fulfil these obligations, whether intentional or not, can result in punishment. The wife can be accused of witchcraft for failing to respect the ancestors, potentially leading to the dissolution of the marriage.

Ademiluka (2018) mentions that patriarchal systems remain a central feature of many traditional African societies, shaping structures of power that give men social and economic advantage while limiting women's opportunities. These systems are evident across different cultural contexts, from West to East Africa, where men are placed in positions of leadership and authority. By embedding male dominance within cultural norms and institutions, these traditions normalise inequality and make it a stable part of community life. In marriage, patriarchal norms create a clear hierarchy in which husbands hold authority over their wives (Tunbosun, 2020). African women are often required to seek their husbands' consent before making decisions related to their movements, social engagements, or reproductive choices. Such arrangements are reinforced through cultural practices, for example, among the Yoruba, where kneeling before one's husband is seen as a sign of respect and acknowledgement of his higher status.

According to Musyoki et al. (2020), cultural ideals of womanhood are also constructed in ways that maintain patriarchal control. Women are expected to embody traits such as obedience, gentleness, passivity, and selflessness, with

their social identity defined primarily through their roles as wives, mothers, or daughters. This framework not only limits women's independence but also discourages them from challenging male authority, thereby keeping gender hierarchies intact. Marriage often becomes a means through which women's marginalisation is sustained within their communities. Wives may be treated as outsiders who must constantly prove their loyalty to their husband's family. In polygynous households, these pressures are intensified as women compete for their husbands' attention and resources while managing difficult relationships with co-wives (Mwania, 2021).

2.6.2 Examining the impact of polygamy on women's lives and identities

According to Baloyi (2013), polygamy was created to legitimise men's never-ending sexual desires. Moreover, it is viewed as a tradition that promotes patriarchal values and diminishes the dignity and self-worth of women. Sabalele argues that unhealthy competition is generated among the wives, and it is impossible to control in a peaceful environment. Polygamy is typically limited to men who are in positions of high economic, political, and social influence. Furthermore, it represents masculinity and manhood over womanhood. In African societies, wives are associated with males, whereas females rely entirely on their spouses (Geertz, 2017). Polygamy is believed to be influenced by the man's wealth rather than the woman's love or desires. Baloyi also contends that polygamous unions result in discord, envy, rivalry, and tension. Lastly, Additionally, polygamous marriages are intended for affluent and influential individuals who could financially support multiple wives.

According to Daoud et al. (2020), husbands schedule visits to all wives to reduce conflict and jealousy. Yet, women endure the negatives of polygamy despite their tears and suffering, which has allowed the system to persist. Polygamy negatively impacts women in multiple ways and is a very controlling system. For example, a wife who complains and argues often does not receive frequent visits from her husband. The most advantageous position for a woman in a polygamous

relationship is to be completely submissive. Polygamy has never been considered normal. It is deemed abnormal because it leads to discord and causes significant suffering for women.

In contrast, polyandry is not acceptable in African culture. It is seen as promiscuous, leading to judgment and social exclusion for any woman practising it. Recent studies indicate that women in polygamous marriages tend to suffer more serious psychological issues than those in monogamous unions. Research reveals that these women often experience increased levels of anxiety and depression. This includes diminished sexual satisfaction, reduced desire, arousal, and ability to reach orgasm. These emotional challenges are linked to several causes, namely, limited attention from husbands who must split their time among multiple wives. This includes financial pressures due to larger households and the emotional instability that comes with sharing a spouse (Alhuzail et al., 2024).

Women who were initially in monogamous marriages often endure emotional distress when their husbands take additional wives. Besser et al. (2024) refer to this phenomenon as "First Wife Syndrome," which involves feelings of anxiety and low self-worth as these women view new wives as threats to their role in the family. The rivalry for the husband's attention can result in feelings of rejection and emotional neglect. Sarib et al. (2024) also believe that polygamy fosters an atmosphere of competition and tension among co-wives, often leading to jealousy and strained relationships. These challenges are especially pronounced for women with anxious attachment patterns, who are more likely to feel insecure and emotionally unsettled in such marriages. The structure of polygamous unions, rooted in patriarchal norms and unequal power relations, contributes to emotional and social difficulties for women involved.

2.7 Exploring the paradox of childbearing and patriarchal dominance in African societies

Marriages are formed to produce a child to carry on the family lineage. According to Whittaker et al. (2025), the primary purpose of marriage in Africa It is to have

children and uphold authority. This differs from Western cultures, where married couples may opt not to have children despite getting married at a young age. Marriage and procreation are closely linked in African societies. Marriage lacks fulfilment without reproduction; having an heir is essential for completion. Children are seen as central to the meaning and success of marriage, far beyond their immediate roles in the nuclear family. Among the Ibibio people, as well as in other African communities, children are deeply valued as essential to marital stability.

Marriage is often understood not just as a personal or romantic union, but as a cultural institution designed to ensure reproduction and the survival of the human lineage. A union blessed with many children is usually regarded as prosperous, while a marriage without offspring may be viewed negatively since children are often seen as a major source of happiness and fulfilment in the home. Children also hold great spiritual and social significance in African families. Within the extended family structure, children help maintain the family legacy and ancestral continuity. They carry the family name forward, inherit land and property, and offer care and support to ageing parents. Culturally, they are believed to serve as a link between the living and the dead, reinforcing the family's spiritual heritage through practices such as reincarnation and ancestor veneration (Maponya, 2021).

Mensah et al. (2024) state that when a marriage does not produce children, it is often considered unsuccessful, especially in the Igbo culture, where raising children is seen as a key purpose of marriage. Couples without children may face social stigma and assumptions that their marriage lacks value or meaning. Such perspectives reflect the wider belief that children provide not just emotional satisfaction but also economic, social, and symbolic benefits to the household. The importance of children even influences burial customs and ancestral traditions. For instance, people who die childless may be buried away from the family compound or with symbolic items representing children, underscoring the idea that not having offspring interrupts the ancestral line. These burial practices highlight how communities place lasting importance on fertility and lineage, reinforcing social norms around marriage and procreation.

Asatsa et al. (2025) mention that a marriage without children leads to a hopeless situation. African society values childbearing greatly and considers being unable to have children a curse. Womanhood in African societies requires women to bear not just any child but, specifically, the heir, the male child. The desire to have descendants is a strong focus among males in African societies. African men marry to ensure the continuation of their lineage through children. Children are the crucial connection between the present, past, and future and the sole chance for the lineage and the nation's survival. A boy child is preferred for handling or carrying on the family lineage, as he is seen as the connection between the living and the deceased.

In contrast, the girl child is typically expected to marry and move away from her family. Maponya (2021) affirms that a girl's rightful place within her marriage does not qualify her to represent the family name. A woman is only valued through her ability to give birth to offspring for the family she is married to. People often think a girl's worth lies in her ability to serve her future husband and family, leading her mother to train her for this role. These customs are linked to male dominance. In Zulu culture, the male child is twice dedicated to the ancestors through the sacrifice of goats in a ritual known as imbeleko, which holds significant importance in a child's life. Whittaker et al. (2025) refer to it as the society's second birth. During the circumcision ceremony, a male child's second dedication to his ancestors involves using his blood. The surgeon should ensure that a portion of the blood is set to fall on the ground to honour the boy's ancestors, believed to live beneath the ground. They believe such a ceremony enables the ancestors to recognise the child and allows him to perform ancestral rituals for his family as the heir.

According to Whittaker et al. (2025) the first son's birth confirms a marriage that fully assimilates a woman into her spouse's family. The married wife receives greater respect in the family when she delivers a male child, especially if it is her first. However, a woman without children is harshly criticised by both her family and society, with some believing her ancestors have disowned her. Being childless is seen as the ultimate failure in life. In certain extreme situations, she may be

returned to her family to participate in specific rituals, which could result in the marriage ending. Although there is limited recent scholarly work that directly explores the *imbeleko* ritual or the specific use of circumcision blood in ceremonies, current research supports the continued importance of ancestral traditions in African cultures such as Zulu culture. Ancestor veneration remains a vital practice among the Zulu, with a strong focus on the paternal lineage. This supports the idea that male offspring are culturally viewed as key figures responsible for carrying out rituals on behalf of their family ancestors.

2.8 Conclusion

In both private and public spheres, womanhood has never been valued and respected. Women struggle to find their true identities in African societies. African women are forced to believe that womanhood lies within the ability to bear children, most importantly, a boy child. Stiwanism emphasises that the well-being of women's bodies and identities must be a central concern of African feminism (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994). Women accept that being a valuable woman requires submissiveness to men. Culture has always played a significant role in women's lives, especially those in polygamy. This literature review examined how womanhood has been questioned by feminist scholars and portrayed in feminist texts such as Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke* (1982) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), arguing that the subjugation of women is not an inherent condition but a product of prevailing patriarchal structures.

CHAPTER THREE: EMPOWERMENT THROUGH TRANSGRESSION: THE COMPLEX POLITICS OF PROSTITUTION IN NAWAL EL SAADAWI'S *WOMAN AT POINT ZERO* (1983)

3.1 Introduction

The novel serves as a poignant call and plea for change directed at African women within Egyptian society and across Africa. The novel reflects upon and tackles the challenges women face that lead to oppression, subjugation, abuse, and violence. Nawal El Saadawi vividly illustrates women's distressing experiences in her patriarchal society (Egypt). The selected text visually portrays the oppression, sexual harassment, domestic violence, and intimidation faced by Egyptian women in their patriarchal societal environment. Through the perspective of the Stiwanist theory in literary analysis, this chapter examines the dilemmas of womanhood and belonging in patriarchal society. African women have endured significant hardships through the four interrelated domains of power, namely, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal.

Stiwanism demands more profound structural and systemic changes. African female characters challenge African traditions, cultures, and societal norms to safeguard their self-consciousness. They foster a sense of individualism and secure their rightful place within their communities. Therefore, Stiwanism helps to address the harsh realities faced by African women. This theory helps to examine and readdress the concept of womanhood and belonging in a new radical African context. Therefore, this study offers a unique way of readdressing African women's challenges. It questions social and cultural practices seen as inherently oppressive without deferring to cultural relativism. This theory allows an analysis of *Woman at Point Zero* through a contextualised historical, political, economic, socio-dynamics context and African gender perspectives. This analytical chapter also assesses the cultural privileges that African female characters face in a patriarchal setting. Moreover, it seeks to interrogate new narrative elements that radical African female authors use to destroy patriarchy.

According to Salahuddin (2021), Nawal El Saadawi is recognised by critics as a feminist writer. Nawal El Saadawi is one of the leading African feminist authors and an internationally acclaimed and polarising female novelist from Africa. A distinguished medical professional who has honourably worked as a physician, psychiatrist, and advocate for human rights. Her creative works encompass non-fiction, short stories, drama, and prose fiction. Salahuddin (2021) states that Sadaawi describes her heroines as young women ensnared by the adversities imposed by the patriarchal constraints of their societies. *Woman at Point Zero* (1983) centres on the exploitation, intimidation, and sexual harassment faced by women. Malti-Douglas (1995) characterises the novel as a powerful feminist critique of relationships between men and women. Essentially, men significantly contribute to the oppression and abuse of women (Malti-Douglas, 1995). Through the subjugation of women stemming from both patriarchal and matriarchal viewpoints, the author El Saadawi uncovers the primary motivation behind her works.

Citing El Saadawi, Alkali (2012) notes that Nawal El Saadawi admits that her writing was initially motivated by anger. *Woman at Point Zero* tells the story of Firdaus through three parts: a preface, the main narrative, and a concluding section. In the foreword, Nawal El Saadawi describes her attempt to understand and connect with Firdaus while researching women prisoners convicted of various crimes. The main body of the novel presents Firdaus' life, told in her own words as El Saadawi listens. Firdaus was born into a society that viewed women as inferior to men. Her father, a poor and uneducated farmer, often beat her and her mother, creating a home filled with violence and fear. When growing up, she played "bride and bridegroom" in the fields with a boy named Mohammadain. This early experience awakened in her a sense of physical pleasure and a memory that stayed with her and resurfaced quietly whenever she found herself in love. She later becomes a well-known prostitute and is held in Qanatir Prison for killing her pimp.

Egyptian culture prohibits women from entering the field after getting circumcised. As an Egyptian woman, Firdaus is denied access to the field after her circumcision, also known as female genital mutilation. After Firdaus' parents pass away, she moves to Cairo, where her uncle looks after her, but he abuses her sexually and forces her to wed a bachelor, Mr Sheikh Mahmoud, who is over sixty years old. There are numerous occasions where Firdaus gets beaten by her husband. The protagonist finally flees back to her uncle's home, but her uncle takes her back to Sheikh Mahmoud's house. However, she flees again and meets Bayoumi, who turns to sexually abuse her. Sharifa Salah El Dine meets Firdaus and introduces her to prostitution, of which she later considers a high-paying profession.

After resigning from a private company due to inadequate salary, Firdaus returns to prostitution. She feels confident that prostitution is a better profession than an office job. Later on, Firdaus meets Marzouk, who mistreats her and takes all her earnings. However, the protagonist manages to kill him in self-defence. While in jail, the prison physician recommends that the protagonist draft a request to lessen her punishment to incarceration instead of execution. Nevertheless, Firdaus declines to sign it, choosing death over a life in captivity. In the epilogue, El Saadawi shares her emotions upon learning about Firdaus' narrative.

3.2 Travails of the African women

Collins (2000) identifies four interconnected domains of power that fulfil various roles in sustaining the status quo: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal. The matrix of domination is organised along axes such as race, gender, and social class, and it is structured on multiple levels. Individuals encounter and resist oppression through their narratives; the communal aspect of the cultural backdrop is shaped by race, class, and gender, as well as the structural level of societal institutions. Human relationships can also be restrictive and burdensome. Instances of domestic violence and abuse, or scenarios where oppressive images reinforce Black women's internalised subjugation, signify personal domination. The identical circumstance may appear noticeably distinct

based on the awareness one possesses to understand it. This degree of personal awareness is a crucial domain where fresh insights can lead to transformation.

Conventional narratives suggest that power, as a form of domination, functions from the upper echelons downward, coercing and managing reluctant subjects to submit to the authority of stronger superiors. However, these narratives overlook women's means of survival in a male-dominated society. The victim's readiness to participate in her victimisation poses a challenge. The community also overlooks the ongoing resistance shown by African women, even when the prospects for success seem slim. Stiwanist thought underscores the value that African women thinkers assign to consciousness as a realm of liberation by highlighting the significance of self-definition and the need for an open mind. Stiwanist women thinkers understand that domination functions not just by imposing power from above, but also by co-opting the energy of those below for its purposes. In striving to reframe the perspective of African women collectively, feminist theorists like Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Zora Neale Hurston, and Fannie Lou Hamer provide each African woman with the intellectual resources needed to combat various forms of oppression.

The interpersonal and disciplinary domain of power within the matrix of domination impacts everyone daily. In this study, the interpersonal domain of power pertains to how African women encounter oppression and power relations in their relationships. Meanwhile, the disciplinary domain of power administers and manages oppression, implements and enforces laws. Collins (2000) argues that by engaging in regular daily interactions at the microlevel of social organisation, individuals maintain the dominance of others. Empowerment in this area involves making intentional choices to transform daily connections. She further explains that this adopts a perspective that fosters a sociological imagination, enabling individuals to use knowledge instead of exploiting, commodifying, or dehumanising those in marginalised communities.

The struggles of a woman start at birth and from the most basic social unit, which is the family. Firdaus suffers from domestic violence, sexual abuse, molestation,

torture and manipulation from her male-dominated Egyptian society. From her journey through childhood to womanhood, Firdaus explains her life as full of traumatic events. The protagonist gives a vivid description of the home she grew up in. Her father is described as a careless father. Through a series of events, it becomes evident how patriarchal African men are towards African women. Firdaus explains that she has many siblings like chicks, multiplying in spring, shivering in winter, and losing their feathers. When one of her sisters dies, her father eats nonchalantly his supper and goes to bed. Most of the time, she asks herself who her father is because she feels he does not love her. Firdaus goes on to explain that she feels like a stranger in her own home and that she lives in a place where she does not belong.

The protagonist is portrayed as a victim of male deception in a male-centred society. Firdaus explains that her uncle often put her hand between her thighs and sexually assaulted her. She is made to believe it is what uncles usually do to their nieces. Her uncle uses her for his gain and does not have a heart for liberating her. He deceives her in a way that looks like he is trying to help Firdaus be educated. She is taught how to write and read poems of Ibn Malik and the alphabet. Immediately after her father dies, he takes Firdaus to live with him in Cairo and sends her to elementary school. During winter, she shares a bed with her uncle to the extent that she feels like the wife of the house. Her uncle goes the extra mile for the protagonist, making her believe that he is always available to her.

When I was awarded my primary school certificate, he bought me a little wristwatch and took me to the cinema that night. I saw a woman dancing. Her thighs were naked. And I saw a man hugging a woman. Then he kissed her on the lips. I hid my face behind my hand and did not dare to look at my uncle. Later, he told me that dancing was a sin and that kissing a man, too, was a sin... he became a different man (1983:45).

Reflecting on the above quote, Firdaus develops self-consciousness as she realises that men are her oppressive tool. She admits that everything her uncle does for her is a deception and feels sad for being gullible. Firdaus is now thinking and acting differently. The fact that her uncle now teaches the morals of life makes her question whether their relationship is real or fake. The sudden change in his behaviour makes Firdaus realise that she is just used to sexual pleasure, which comes after learning that he is marrying the daughter of his teacher at El Azhar. This is supported by Saputri and Harianto II (2023). They identify two forms of resistance depicted in English literature: covert and overt. Their study suggests that the protagonist's use of overt resistance against oppression demonstrates a growing awareness of her capacity. This includes her capacity for self-governance and is also indicative of a developing female consciousness. There are valuable insights into the evolution of female consciousness within African female novels. This lays the groundwork for further exploration of the female protagonist's journey toward an enhanced sense of self.

Additionally, when Firdaus goes to secondary school, her uncle puts her in the boarding girls' section of the school. When other parents come to see their children on weekends, Firdaus has no one to visit her. This contributes to her anger towards her uncle and all men. She states that her eyes would follow parents and the movement of the street like a prisoner condemned to look out at life over the top of a high prison wall. Firdaus befriending Wafeya from her boarding school makes her carry a heavy load of life on her shoulders. Although she does not want to talk about her traumatic childhood, they both exchanged some secrets, of which Wafeya talks about her love life, and Firdaus talks about her hopes for the future and mentions that her future is hers to paint in her desired colours. This shows the power and freedom that the protagonist has over her life and that it is up to her to make her own choice on what she wants in life.

3.3 Breaking the Chains of Cultural Control in a Male-Centred Society

Bifulco (2021) notes that individuals who have endured intensely painful experiences often recount their narratives profoundly emotionally, inconsistently, and disjointedly. At the beginning of chapter two of the novel, the protagonist narrates her life to Nawal El Saadawi. Firdaus first talks of her life as a prostitute and what she desires in life. She mentions that she has been searching for something that would fill her with pride and make her superior to everyone else. With all the bad things happening in her life, she perseveres despite being beaten and left to starve by her father. Including her uncle, who takes advantage of her poverty and sexually abuses her. Her husband, Sheikh Mahmoud, beats her whenever he feels like it and lastly, Bamidele who also fools Firdaus and acts like he understands her situation but later abuses her and calls her a slut. With such patriarchal activities happening in society, a woman must make a decision that will save her, and for Firdaus, this is through prostitution. The novel depicts the cultural ideology that women are deemed inferior to men and should be subservient.

In Africa, education was not considered feminine. Before the 21st century, there was limited access to women's education in Egypt. Access to education was minimal due to patriarchal social structures that governed women's lives from an early age. Firdaus's move to the capital and largest city of Egypt grants her the privilege of education. Going to elementary school allows her to learn and pass her grades exceptionally well. Firdaus gets a chance to live and explore a girls' boarding school. She learns about new things such as the Persians, the Turks and the Arabs. She prefers reading books written by rulers as she wishes to become the head of state. Regardless of women not being appointed heads of state, Firdaus mentions that she is unlike other women. She further mentions that she wants to be different from all men who are rulers. She adds that these men all they have in common is an avaricious and distorted personality and an ever-ending appetite for money, sex and unlimited power.

Hegemonic domain of power denotes the framework of concepts created by a powerful group that legitimises their actions, such as culture and media. Collins

(2000) states that traditional concepts that support the system in this society of power are reshaped as society evolves. Through ideology, culture, and awareness, the dominant group's beliefs become normalised as widely accepted notions that uphold their status. Patriarchal culture sees education as unnecessary and dangerous. Firdaus excels well in her studies, however she is deprived of an opportunity to further her studies. She is denied an opportunity to attend university by her uncle as he fears that she might engage in sexual activities with men. Living in a society that sees things differently makes a significant impact on those who are less privileged. The only option for the protagonist is to agree to engage in a forced marriage with Sheikh Mahmoud. Her uncle's wife mentions that girls of her age are married and have borne children. She further explains that it is for the best for Firdaus to marry a wealthy man.

The protagonist mentions that a place where she is supposed to seek refuge is a place of torture and pain for her. She explains the relationship she has with her husband. Sheikh Mahmoud often complains about her for being careless and yells loudly so all the neighbours can hear. He develops the habit of beating her to an extent where her face and body become swollen and bruised. Her uncle describes such incidents as usual. He explains that all husbands often beat their wives. It becomes clear that it is men well-versed in their religion and culture who beat their wives. The precepts of religion permitted such behaviour as punishment. The uncle added that a virtuous woman should not complain about her husband and that her duty is perfect obedience.

3.4 Defying Patriarchal Structures: Prostitution as an Act of Resistance Against Systemic Oppression

In the selected text, the term prostitute goes beyond its usual meaning of a woman who performs sexual services for financial gain. The protagonist reconceptualises prostitution as a symbol for the widespread exploitation and commercialisation of women within a patriarchal society. The protagonist perceives prostitution as the most straightforward form of existence for women since it candidly recognises the

transactional essence of relationships between men and women. The structural domain of power pertains to the organisation and implementation of power through extensive institutions such as the economy, legal systems, education, and the state. In the novel, African men dominate politics and ultimately determine the destinies of women, particularly those who independently select their desired careers, like prostitution.

The law is the primary authority in maintaining justice and ensures the community is secure and pleasant. Nonetheless, the law can be more protective of those who possess the power to enforce it. Concerning Arab law, specifically in Egypt, ElMorally (2024) reveals that under Sadat's leadership, numerous individuals were detained for opposing him. In many countries where women lack substantial representation in positions of power, male-dominated political and religious institutions often obstruct legislation that would grant women rights such as land ownership or access to credit. As a result, countless women remain trapped in poverty and are unable to achieve financial independence. Denying women access to loans and financial services severely limits their ability to start businesses, grow existing ventures, or sustain themselves economically. More critically, these economic restrictions can prevent women from escaping abusive relationships or making autonomous choices about their reproductive and sexual health (Tchoukou, 2022).

Legal systems can serve to reinforce male dominance through their very structure. In Egypt, for instance, the penal code allows for broad judicial interpretation, which often works against women and sustains patriarchal authority. Instead of tackling the issue of women's marginalisation, the political system continues to favour elite, urban, and educated men, who remain disproportionately represented in positions of power. Moreover, personal status laws shaped by specific readings of Sharia law give men significant authority over women in key areas such as marriage, divorce, and child custody. These legal arrangements entrench gender inequality and make it harder for women to claim their rights or engage fully in public and political life (ElMorally, 2024).

Men control the legal system, preventing women from honestly expressing themselves as equals to men. Firdaus chooses prostitution as a career, but the law judges her. This causes the protagonist to feel uneasy when discussing the law and politicians. She explains that each time she picks up a newspaper and finds the picture of a man who was one of them, she spits on it which shows her hatred towards men. Legal institutions can often frighten some individuals as they fail to offer reassurance. Regardless of facing traumatic experiences, the protagonist feels scared of reporting such abuse to the law. She mentions that the word police frightened her. For the streets have become a safe place in which she seeks refuge. Saadawi (2015) mentions that Arab women experience fear when presenting their issues to the legal system. In the novel, police officials play a role in women's challenges in a male-dominated society. The police, as law enforcement officers, treat women as less human beings with no rights. During job hunting, the protagonist meets a police officer who forcefully grabs her by the arm and rapes her.

You are a sex worker, and it is my responsibility to apprehend you and others like you. To tidy up the nation and shield decent families from individuals like you. However, I prefer not to employ force. Maybe we can agree discreetly without any trouble. I will provide you with a pound (1983:74).

Providing insights on the above remark, the police officer describes his faith as an act of cleaning the country and protecting the respectable families from prostitutes like Firdaus. This is ironic as the protagonist mentions that all her customers are married, educated, and wear expensive clothes. She expresses how disgusted she is by the law and everyone who favours it. Evolutionary men with principles are not different from the rest. They use their cleverness to get, in return for principles, what other men buy with their money. The protagonist further explains that revolution for men is like sex for us, something to be abused and sold.

Saadawi (2015) argues that men with increased patriarchal authority use the law as a tool to constrain and overpower women. In an even more ironic twist, men wielding patriarchal authority turn into dictators while governing a nation (Hosking, 2005). Some people believe that women are born subordinate to men, and patriarchy has existed from the very beginning and will always exist, like the other rules of nature. According to the Greek philosopher Aristotle (1943), men are always active, and women are passive. The biological difference between women makes them inferior in their capacity and their ability to make decisions. Austrian neurologist and the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1925), agrees that for women, anatomy is destiny. In his view, a normal human is male. However, this study challenges such male supremacy.

3.5 Asserting Agency: Using Bodily Autonomy to Confront Patriarchal Oppression

Prostitution serves as a form of resistance against male dominance and societal double standards. It is essential to recognise that since Firdaus differs from other women who endure domestic violence, her pursuit of a better life ultimately led her to new stages and levels of existence. When she makes the ethical choice to engage in the forbidden world of prostitution, she becomes the delight of promiscuous men who cannot resist her tempting physique. Firdaus mentions that one of her clients compliments her body. A client mentions that the protagonist's hands look strong, clever and possess their own language. As her profession continues to evolve, she develops refined tastes and an invaluable sense of worth, thus selecting her partners to whom she offers her services as a sex worker. The protagonist further expresses her joyful interest in her profession as a prostitute.

After I had spent three years in the company, I realised that as a prostitute I had been looked upon with more respect and been valued more highly than all the female employees...I came to realise that a female employee is more afraid of losing her job than a prostitute is of losing her

life. An employee fears losing her job and becoming a prostitute because she does not understand that the prostitute's life is, in fact, better than hers... I now know that all of us are prostitutes who sold ourselves at varying prices and that an expensive prostitute is better than a cheap one (1983:91).

Commenting on the above quote, a man does not know a woman's value; she is the one who determines it. Firdaus explains how prostitution has given her a voice and freedom. She begins to understand that setting principles as a woman is highly important. According to the protagonist, a woman deserves to live a happy life. She mentions that her make-up is always the best, and her hair is done by stylists who tend to the services of upper-class women. The protagonist will explore other career opportunities using her secondary school certificate. However, she returns to her old profession as she does not feel valued and respected as a woman. She discovers that the only place she belongs is being a prostitute, where she makes her own decisions and gets a better payment as her customers keep increasing, which means an increase in her salary. Women still find themselves in the lower class, even in so-called respectable professions.

In Woman at Point Zero, Firdaus turns to prostitution as both a survival strategy and a form of defiance against patriarchal control. While her entry into sex work is initially forced, she later embraces it as a deliberate choice to gain financial independence and autonomy over her own body, privileges largely denied to women in her society. By setting high prices for her services and enjoying a lifestyle more comfortable than that of women trapped in poorly paid work or restrictive family roles, she challenges the cultural expectation that women remain submissive and economically reliant on men. The novel also exposes the deep hypocrisy of patriarchal norms as men publicly condemn prostitution while privately exploiting prostitutes or other women through transactional sexual relationships.

The protagonist comes to see that women across different social classes, whether sex workers, wives or employees, are often compelled to trade their bodies for

survival or advancement. In recognising this reality, she reframes her choice as a way to reclaim power, using a role society vilifies to resist male dominance and the moral double standards that underpin it. For Firdaus, prostitution is a means of empowerment, and it grants her the freedom to live without the constant oversight of men. Unlike her earlier experiences in oppressive family and marital settings, she can now eat, dress and move as she pleases. In doing so, she redefines rebellion not through traditional activism but through claiming control within a system designed to subjugate her, thereby unsettling the very structures that seek to dictate her place in the world.

From a Stiwanist perspective, which foregrounds the inclusion of African women in social transformation, Firdaus' experiences in the novel demonstrate how socio-political and economic systems reinforce women's marginalisation while simultaneously offering limited avenues for resistance. Molarra Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) argues that African women's narratives are central to challenging patriarchal structures and shaping social change. Socio-politically, the protagonist's restricted freedom reflects broader structural barriers. Mlotshwa (2021) highlights how women's participation in African politics is often symbolic, as entrenched patriarchal systems restrict meaningful involvement and decision-making. Firdaus' struggles mirror this reality, illustrating how institutionalised gender inequality systematically limits women's self-rule, even when they attempt to resist.

Furthermore, political exclusion intensifies women's economic marginalisation. African women are frequently denied meaningful roles in governance and leadership (Egonmwan, 2002). The protagonist's experience with the legal system designed to protect men while punishing women like her illustrates this persistent marginalisation: She complains that the law protects men and punishes women like her. This exclusion reflects how political institutions maintain gender inequalities, blocking women's efforts to seek justice or influence policy reforms. Nevertheless, Oyedele (2012) points out that history shows women's resilience and capacity to lead when empowered. Socio-political inclusion remain crucial to improving women's economic standing and driving progress.

Economically, women's access to resources is a key determinant of their independence and ability to challenge oppression. Mlotshwa (2021) affirms that control over income and property strengthens women's bargaining power and allows them to act with greater autonomy. The protagonist's efforts to assert control over her earnings, although achieved through socially stigmatised means, exemplify the critical role of economic agency in resisting patriarchal expectations.

Aina (2012) asserts that women frequently face barriers that deny them equal educational opportunities and economic participation. Firdaus' experience reflects this harsh reality. After suffering abuses during her childhood and marriage, and having no access to education or financial freedom, she turns to prostitution. This choice is not simply out of desperation but also a way to reclaim some measure of control over her financial situation in an oppressive system that treats women as commodities. This act highlights the intersectionality of patriarchal dominance and capitalist exploitation. Additionally, inheritance customs and property laws that exclude women exacerbate their financial instability. Her ongoing reliance on men for shelter and support, until she takes control of her life, exemplifies this economic disenfranchisement common under customary legal traditions.

In the context of broader activism, Daniel (2021) and Ndelu et al. (2017) declares that African feminist movements, such as the #MustFall campaigns in South Africa, incorporated intersectional demands that exposed systemic gender inequalities. However, internal challenges limited the impact of these movements. Firdaus' individual defiance resonates with these activist efforts, but her life also underscores the limits of isolated resistance, demonstrating that meaningful change often requires collective mobilisation. Boonzaier (2021) adds a psychological perspective, emphasising how women reclaim agency through control over their bodies and personal narratives. The protagonist's insistence on self-definition and rejection of patriarchal valuations aligns with this framework, illustrating how personal acts of resistance can simultaneously serve as political statements. Collectively, her experiences exemplify the intersection of social,

political, and economic oppression in African societies. The novel highlights both the possibilities and limitations of individual resistance, reaffirming Stiwanism's claim that women's empowerment must be linked to structural transformation.

3.6 Androcide as a Symbolic Act of Resistance

The phrase androcide denotes the intentional murder of men. It originates from the Greek roots "andro," signifying "man," and "-cide," meaning to eliminate. According to Hansen (2002), feminist literature and theory, androcide is occasionally employed symbolically to signify resistance or revenge against patriarchal systems that sustain violence and oppression towards women. The idea of androcide in Firdaus murdering her pimp in the novel is depicted as a revolutionary feminist action. This radical act represents defiance against patriarchy and systemic oppression. El Saadawi portrays the murder at her novel's peak as a symbolic gesture, committed by a woman embodying all women against a man who symbolises all men. Her act of killing is portrayed not as a single event but as the result of her encounters with male aggression, exploitation, and treachery. It is presented as a symbolic gesture of freedom and resistance against the patriarchal system that has held her down all her life.

The protagonist realises that the man's fear of her as a woman is profound and universal, making it enlightening. One that Saadawi presents to her audience as an essential disclosure. Towards the conclusion of the novel, a pimp named Marzouk appears to possess greater connections and influence in society. The pimp seeks dominance over the protagonist's life, including her income. He abuses her and turns her into a prisoner of his requests; however, she later kills him. The protagonist murdering Marzouk, her pimp, is portrayed as a moment of realisation and empowerment. Firdaus says, "I recognised that I had been fearful, and that fear resided in me the whole time, until I saw fear in his eyes. She notices the fear within his eyes, which frees her from her fear and allows her to act with certainty. The act of repeatedly stabbing him is depicted as a natural and rational reaction to the systemic abuse she has experienced, accompanied by a sense of surprise and

understanding. The protagonist recognises that her fear of men has hindered her freedom, and conquering this fear enables her to challenge the oppressive systems embodied by Marzouk.

To have arrived at the truth means that one no longer fears death. Death and truth are similar in that both require great courage to face. And the truth is like death in that it kills. When I killed, I did it with the truth, not with a knife. This is why they are afraid and, in a hurry, to execute me. They do not fear my knife. It is my truth which frightens them (1983:124).

Reflecting on the above quote, Firdaus unleashes her radicality by killing the pimp before he could have the opportunity to defeat her. The fearful truth gives Firdaus great strength and protects her from fearing death, life, hunger, nakedness or destruction. It is the same truth which prevents her from fearing the brutality of patriarchy. The murder is also universalised in the narrative, as Firdaus sees the pimp not as an individual but as a representative of all men who uphold patriarchy. Sadaawi advocates androicide as a response to patriarchy, which, to Firdaus, represents multiple types of abuse and injustice, including capitalism. Her act of androicide is thus positioned as a radical rejection of the entire patriarchal system, which is depicted as the root cause of her suffering. El Saadawi perceives the enemy not just in men but also in the monetary system controlled by men. Soon after Firdaus kills the pimp, a prince pays her two thousand Egyptian pounds to have sex with him. Afterwards, she snatches the notes from his hand and tears them into little pieces with a pent-up fury. This destruction of currency, as with the earlier killing, is for Firdaus a spontaneous act of liberation that triggers new understanding. This radicalism is emphasised by Firdaus' subsequent destruction of money, symbolising her rejection of the capitalist system intertwined with patriarchy.

The protagonist' androicide corresponds with the radical feminist analysis of patriarchy as the source of all oppression. Her deed contests the idea of male invulnerability and reveals the underlying violence within patriarchal structures.

The novel presents Firdaus' actions as radical, contesting conventional African feminist perspectives that typically focus on collaboration with men and reform-oriented tactics. Instead, El Saadawi promotes a more radical position, proposing that genuine change might necessitate dismantling oppressive structures and their supporters. Her act of killing men is depicted as a transformative moment that challenges the conventions of both African and Western feminist movements, rendering *Woman at Point Zero* a compelling and explosive work in feminist literature.

3.7 Conclusion

Sadaawi narrates women's challenges and hardships, ultimately empowering them to oppose the patriarchal world and aspire for a brighter future. Their quest for comfort and ongoing battle in a male-dominated society unite them and strengthen their ties of female friendship. The novel also calls for a radical rewriting of womanliness, especially in terms of female choice and career paths such as prostitution. The killing of the pimp is not a crime of passion but a radical declaration that refuses the system of oppression and masculinity. Saadawi depicts her female protagonist, Firdaus from the angle of a male-centred society as a weapon of resistance.

CHAPTER FOUR: AFRICAN WOMEN RESISTING PATRIARCHAL GENDER ROLES, AND EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN ABI DARE'S *THE GIRL WITH THE LOUDING VOICE* (2020)

4.1 Introduction

Through the lens of Stiwanism, this chapter analyses the selected text, focusing on African women's challenges in patriarchal society. The novel is set in post-colonial Nigeria. The novel is a chick-lit genre. Chick-lit is literature written by women about women for people to read. A prominent advocate and academic of chick lit, Suzanne Ferriss (2006) defines Chick-lit as a modern fiction showcasing recognisable, young female protagonists confronting various romantic, career, and societal challenges particular to their age group. Ferriss states that Chick-lit centres on the life, romances, challenges, and struggles of the female lead and is frequently interpreted as a representation of contemporary women and their journeys. This Chick-lit novel is penned openly by a first-person narrator who reveals her goals and insecurities. The novel is written by a female novelist, Abi Dare, born in Lagos. The female protagonist, Adunni, shares her story of the challenges she encounters growing up as a girl in a Nigerian patriarchal society.

Adunni is a fourteen-year-old girl from Ikati village, Nigeria. Her life undergoes a significant change after her mother passes away. Her father forces her to wed a wealthy older man, Morufu. The cost for the bride is four goats, farm birds, two sacks of rice, and five thousand naira. However, Adunni sees marriage as a threat to her education and goal of becoming a teacher. Adunni becomes Morufu's third wife, first being Labake, followed by Khadija. Although Adunni is forced to marry a man she does not love, she keeps her dream of being a teacher alive in the future. Adunni learns that her duty as a wife is to bear children, a male heir. Khadija has three daughters and is expecting a fourth baby. Khadija was fifteen years old when she wed Morufu. Her father consented to her marriage since Morufu takes care of their community's rent and food. At the peak of the novel, Khadija opens up to Adunni regarding the challenges of her pregnancy and reveals that her former

partner, Bamidele, is the father. When Khadija experiences pregnancy discomfort, she goes to Kere village to seek assistance from Bamidele. Nonetheless, Bamidele leaves them at the Kere River and refrains from performing a ceremony that would save the baby.

Adunni escapes after Khadija passes away in childbirth, fearing responsibility, and seeks refuge with Iya, a close friend of her mother. Upon Adunni's arrival at Agan village, Iya aids her escape by introducing her to her brother, Mr Kola. Mr Kola is an agent who recruits female workers in the villages to work in big cities such as Lagos. Adunni then travels to Lagos with Mr Kola to work as a maid. When Mr Kola and Adunni arrive in Ikoyi village, Adunni meets her new employer, Mrs Florence Adeoti, also known as Big Madam. Big Madam is a rich African woman who rules the Wellington Road Wives Association (WRWA). She lives in a mansion and owns Kayla's Fabrics, which is named after her daughter. Her daughter is to be married to Kunle Kutu, a banker and a first-class graduate of the London School of Economics.

Adunni strives to maintain optimism for her education despite facing intense suffering and mistreatment at Big Madam's home. Upon her arrival, Adunni asks Kofi, the chef, if Big Madam will put her in school, which shows her determination for education. Adunni befriends Ms Tia Dada, a friendly neighbour and member of the WRWA, who helps her learn English and supports her application for the scholarship for female domestic workers. Dare ties up the resolution neatly. Adunni attains her freedom and rights to get an education. Ms Tia tells Adunni that she has received the scholarship, allowing her to escape the oppressive and patriarchal society. Adunni has a chance at a new life filled with liberty, learning, and her laudable voice.

4.2 Advancing Women's Education as Means of Resisting Patriarchal Norms

According to Offorma (2009), education can enable African women to find and own their voices in patriarchal society. It can also empower them economically and equip them with important skills. Even though education can empower women, the

hesitation of certain societies to embrace this transformation presents a challenge. From the beginning of the novel, Adunni's pursuit of education is vivid. Her father forces her to marry Morufu because he is wealthy and could help them with community rent and food. Her first and last worry is to lose her future and not be educated due to child marriage. Adunni fears that she will be unable to finish her studies if she is to wed early. The patriarchal society in which she grew up encourages child marriages and discourages young girls from pursuing their education. Ikati village holds an old perception that girls from the age of fourteen must be married and give birth to plenty of children, especially male children. On the other hand, male children in African societies are viewed as suitable for education.

Baten (2021) notes that implementing Western structured education is conducted unevenly, providing greater chances for males. Dare presents Morufu's fourteen-year-old daughter, Kike, as a radical woman who questions the patriarchal norms, particularly in education. Kike wishes to be a man and questions the patriarchal norm that denies girls education and allows them to be married from the age of fourteen. Kike's complaint depicts a need for change in how girls and boys are treated in her village. She complains about the future of young girls in Ikati who have dreams and are pursuing education. Kike is a tailor who draws delicate styles and dreams of being a good tailor in the future. Her wish is to see all women in the village wearing her style. She stands firm towards her pursuit of education and being a future tailor. Regardless of her being sold to an older man, Baba Ogun, she keeps her dream of being a good tailor alive by keeping a positive mindset.

There are limitations for African women in progressing in education and being considered outside their family roles, expectations, and responsibilities. The character, Adunni, wants to become a teacher. She has wanted to be a teacher since she was two years old. Even before her mother's death, she used to teach trees and leaves in her compound. Adunni personifies leaves and fruits as learners inside a classroom to keep her teaching dream profession alive and active. Adunni wants to teach children in Ikati village and give them a better life.

Kike gives me another smile. See? Adunni, even if you marry my father and think all your hope is finished, your mind is not. Inside your mind, you can be the teacher you want. You like reading books, so feed your mind by reading any book you find, maybe in the dustbins of Idanra town or some cheap ones in the market. One day, perhaps you will become that teacher, maybe not. Tomorrow I go to meet my new husband's family, but inside my mind, I am Kike, the tailor (2020:66).

Reflecting on the above quote, this sincere exchange between Kike and Adunni showcases the intricate web of patriarchal oppression that affects the lives of women in rural Nigeria. Watching the calm yet assertive dialogue between these two women underscores the substantial ways societal expectations seek to undermine their autonomy, impact, and aspirations. Kike's words, imbued with deep compassion and understanding, serve as a powerful antidote to the oppressive grip of patriarchy. Encouraging Adunni to develop her intellect and pursue her dreams suggests a glimpse of the powerful potential found in women's solidarity. The character Kike embodies the quiet strength and resolve the notion that define the lives of many African women who refuse to be silenced or defeated.

At the peak of the novel, Kike's individual experiences emphasise the resilience of the human spirit to withstand and defy various forms of oppression and hardships. Even though she is forced into a marriage that threatens her identity, she clings to her individuality, asserting that in her mind, she remains Kike, the tailor. This heartfelt declaration is a powerful reminder that women find ways to endure, resist, and thrive even in the most challenging circumstances. This enables women to acquire knowledge, skills, and confidence to challenge and transform patriarchal norms. The theme of education as a tool for women's empowerment is extensively depicted in the novel. From the first day Adunni arrives at Big Madam's house, she is attracted to Big Daddy's library, which is full of books to read. Adunni expresses

her joy when entering the library. Her heart is swelling as she looks at it all, and she feels like she has entered a kind of heaven of books and education.

Adunni read *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *Collins English Dictionary*, *African Bible Commentary*, *A History of Nigeria* (2008), *1000 Prayer Points To Secure Your Marriage* and *The Book of Nigerian Facts: from Past to Present*, 5th edition (2014). Adunni finds comfort in reading and studying. She reads *Collins English dictionary* and learns new words and their meanings. As she pages the dictionary, she learns to find new words such as innocent and its meaning. Adunni uses each word she learns in the book to relate to an event that has previously occurred. The definition of innocent is pure. Adunni asks herself how she can be pure after what she went through at Ikati village. She begins to recall the horrible conditions that she was subjected to at Morufu's house. This includes Morufu drinking a firecracker before raping her.

Hafez et al. (2023) state that education removes docility, passivity, and inferiority from women. Commenting on the above quote, the Ocean Oil scholarship program established by Mr Ehi Odafe in honour of his mother, Madam Ese Odafe, empowers female workers in Nigeria, especially those who are more vulnerable. In collaboration with Diamond Special School, Ocean Oil, Nigeria's foremost oil servicing company, invites female domestic workers aged 12-15 to apply for its annual scholarship. Now in its 7th successful year, the scheme is dedicated to ensuring that bright, talented and vulnerable Nigerian girls working in domestic capacity can commence or complete their education. Okechukwu (2017) adds that female domestic workers in Nigeria, such as Adunni, frequently encounter dilemmas regarding their standard of living, including restricted educational opportunities, economic exploitation, and social exclusion. The program offers educational financial aid, allowing Adunni to gain skills, knowledge, and confidence, breaking the cycle of exploitation and poverty. This initiative is especially significant as it aims to empower domestic female workers who are frequently marginalised, exploited, and stripped of their fundamental rights to receive an education

Additionally, Adunni is denied her fundamental rights such as education and protection from violence and abuse. She is compelled into servitude and exposed to physical and emotional mistreatment. Women and girls are ensnared in forced labour and domestic servitude worldwide. The Ocean Oil scholarship program provides hope and freedom for domestic female employees such as Adunni. By funding the education of these female domestic workers, the initiative challenges the idea that domestic workers are just household servants without goals and ambitions. Instead, it recognises their intrinsic worth, dignity, and capacity for growth and advancement. Education is essential to empowerment, allowing these individuals to make informed choices, confront oppressive systems, and advocate for improved working conditions.

Lastly, the initiative's emphasis on education also contests patriarchal standards that sustain the exploitation of female household employees. In Nigeria, patriarchal traditions frequently prescribe that women's roles are confined to the home, with their primary duties being childcare and household tasks. By funding the education of local female workers, the initiative confronts these norms, acknowledging that women can embark on careers, make knowledgeable choices, and add to the economy. This challenge to patriarchal standards is essential, as it can change the lives of numerous domestic female workers, empowering them to escape the cycle of poverty and exploitation. Adunni's aspiration for education and resolve to break free from the bonds of exploitation strongly align with the program's goals, making her a successful applicant. The Ocean Oil scholarship program provides Adunni and similar individuals an opportunity to escape the traps of poverty and exploitation, creating a new route of empowerment and self-determination.

According to *The Book of Nigerian Facts* (2014) by Olumade Daniel, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti was a renowned feminist who fought for equal access for women in education. Education gives African women an opportunity to choose what they want in life. Adunni chooses to be educated and a choice to be free from forced marriage. She has a sharp mind for learning. Her power to pay attention to small details reveals how smart she is. As stated by Kwachou (2020), education can be

a formidable tool that fosters liberated thinking and provides numerous opportunities for women. Dare depicts Adunni as a fierce and opportunity-oriented woman. The protagonist deems it essential to participate in the Ocean Scholarship program. The Ocean Oil Scholarship gives Adunni a chance to be educated and have a loud voice. Despite her difficulty writing a motivational essay and getting a referee for her application, Adunni fights to find someone to represent her application. Ms Tia offers to be her referee for the Ocean Oil Scholarship. She also devotes her time to educating Adunni in English so that she can write a meaningful, motivational essay. Although these two women have different educational standards, they support each other as African women.

4.3 The Contrasting Effects of Formal Education Versus Informal Education

Adunni and Ms Tia originate from contrasting backgrounds. Yet they share a profound bond: their conviction that education is a path to achieving freedom and self-identity. Adunni is a young girl living in Ikati village who is prevented from attending school as her father marries her off instead. However, despite being compelled into marriage and serving as a housemaid in Lagos, her aspiration for an education persists unyieldingly. She aims for more than just reading and writing. Adunni aspires to discover her powerful voice and the capacity to advocate for herself and other girls like her. The protagonist states that education will give her a loud voice and that she wishes to own a school in Ikati and teach girls. She further mentions that girls in Ikati village do not have much chance for school; hence, she wishes to change that. In contrast, Ms Tia is well-educated and financially secure, leading a life different from Adunni'. The novel depicts that there are many ways in which people can be educated. Ms Tia gains her knowledge through proper teaching structures. She has attended a university in Surrey. In contrast, Adunni does not get to enrol in a university and enter a classroom like Ms Tia. She learns through books in Big Madam's library.

According to Masha and Mogoboya (2024), Western education introduced a divide between black men and women. Although British colonial rule ended more than

fifty years ago, its cultural, social, and political influences have been unknowingly inherited and maintained across generations, remaining present in contemporary postcolonial Nigeria. In the novel, Adunni uses education to escape from a life where girls are muted, traded, and neglected. Adunni learns of the Slavery Abolition Act, which was signed in 1833. She understands that the kings in Nigeria were selling people into slavery. However, today, people are no longer in chains, but slavery is continuing. Adunni wants to change that by making people better and not stopping the slave trading of the mind and the body. Even while she resides under Big Madam's roof and faces daily abuse, she clings to this dream. Adunni seizes opportunities to read newspapers, inquire about things she does not understand, and know everything happening around her. This is evident in the novel where Adunni often asks Big Madam questions and gets a slap. Whenever she gets a slap from Big Madam, she slaps back, but only in her mind.

4.4 Female Gendered Roles and Responsibilities in African Society

Patriarchal ideologies entail that promoting education and employment for women and girls would disrupt household responsibilities and lead to a loss of respect for the male figure within the household. However, such claims appear to be a guise for resisting women's liberation. Ogundipe-Leslie (1993) argues that access to education and jobs helps combat female oppression by providing financial independence, leading to greater social and spiritual autonomy. Child marriage remains prevalent in Nigeria due to the federal and state governments. Nigeria's rates of child marriage are some of the highest on the African continent. Similarly, Omobowale et al. (2023) observe that child marriage in Nigeria follows pronounced regional patterns, with prevalence surpassing 70% in some northern states but remaining around 10% in the southeast.

These disparities align closely with the country's legal framework, as the federal system permits states to decide whether to adopt the Child Rights Act, which bans marriage before age eighteen. Notably, all states that have declined to adopt the Act are in the north, where child marriage is most common. Similarly, Adesina et

al. (2020) link the persistence of the practice in these regions to limited educational opportunities, noting that the majority of girls married before eighteen years have received no formal schooling and face economic hardship, prompting families to arrange marriages for financial or political advantage. Together, these findings reveal how legal, educational, and economic inequalities intersect to sustain child marriage in certain areas of Nigeria.

Moreover, having a husband at the age of fourteen is seen as an accomplishment in patriarchal African families. In the novel, the protagonist is praised and given a blessing as she marries a wealthy businessman, Morufu. One of Adunni's friends, Enitan, congratulates Adunni on her new life as a wife and encourages Adunni to be a good wife. She also states that Morufu will take good care of Adunni's family as he is wealthy. Adunni is asked what more she wants when she has a good husband. Enitan's advice shows the impact of gender socialisation and a lack of liberal education. This indicates that being uneducated and having no interest in learning negatively impacts thinking capability. This also includes making irresponsible choices.

This is depicted in many African female novels, such as *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Beatrice holds a different perspective on the importance of marriage in a woman's life. For Beatrice, a woman's crown is her spouse, and she finds it impossible to envision a woman's existence complete without children and a spouse. Hence, Beatrice fails to grasp how Ifeoma could propose that sometimes life starts when a marriage ends. Beatrice's reply argues that most African women are not educated enough to see the importance of education, which leads them to hold different views on life and marriage. Similarly, Adunni is bright and smart, but being smart and educated is not important in her society. Her father forces her to marry an old man for money.

Papa collected my hand, cold and dead and put it inside
Morufu's own and said, 'This is your wife now; from today
till forever, she is your own. Do her however you want. Use

her till she is useless! And everybody was laughing and saying congratulations! Amen! Congratulations! (2020:31).

Commenting on the above quote, African girls and women are portrayed as tools of men. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) highlights the importance of acknowledging that the primary foes of women are the oppressive systems and individuals who promote inequality. Daré depicts the sinister underside of patriarchal societies, where women frequently become mere objects, deprived of their womanhood and dignity and their space in society. The society makes it normal for women to accept that being married means embracing their womanhood. This is evident through the disturbing moment when Adunni marries Morufu. Adunni's father takes her hand and presents it to Morufu, proclaiming her as his wife. This reflects the ways women are objectified and stripped of their humanity. The nonchalant brutality with which the protagonist's father relinquishes his daughter's hand, treating her merely as a tool, starkly depicts how women's bodies and existence are governed and exploited. The laughter and praise that come after this interaction serve as a chilling sign of how this treatment is normalised and even celebrated. It emphasises the ingrained patriarchal beliefs that support Nigerian society.

Lastly, the cultural story from this scene shows deep sadness and despair, depicting a reality where women's existence is reduced to simple exchanges among men. The expressions that Adunni's father makes during the wedding serve as a harsh reminder of how women's bodies endure both physical and emotional mistreatment, with their worth linked only to their capacity to support their husbands and families. This thinking results from a larger cultural narrative that undermines women's lives and experiences, treating them as mere objects to be utilised and disposed of at convenience. And still, amidst this darkness, a flicker of hope exists, suggesting that women's lives can transcend mere transactions and be dignified.

4.5 Traditional roles of women in African marriages

Sometimes femaleness in patriarchal culture marks women as unworthy of respect. Bell Hooks (2002) mentions that women are raised to derive their self-worth from being loved and respected by men. In the novel, Morufu tells his three wives, including Adunni, that he is to be respected. Morufu states that he is the king of the house, and nobody talks back to him. This includes the wives and their children. Although such rules are enforced, Adunni questions such patriarchal ideology. This shows how fierce she is for having a laudable voice and bringing change in women's lives. Adunni, Labake, Khadija, and Ms Tia are subjected to traditional roles of giving birth and, most importantly, to a boy child. Labake has a girl child, Kike, who is Adunni's age. Kike, being Morufu's first child, makes him feel less of a man, as his wish is to have an heir.

Khadija experiences the same patriarchal oppression as the first wife, Labake. The pregnant Khadija has three daughters and no sons. This makes Morufu find these women less valuable for failing to give birth to male children, whom Morufu will send to school. Khadija is consistently told that she had better be carrying a boy child. If not, she will be sent back to her starving family. Hence, Morufu marries Adunni to give him an heir. Morufu wants two boys. He promises to send them to school. Morufu further mentions that his boys will become fluent in English and earn a lot of money as taxi drivers. In this patriarchal society, girls and women are only helpful in the kitchen, the bedroom, and giving birth. This shows that being educated as a man in a patriarchal society, such as Ikati village, means being able to speak English and drive a taxi. He also does not believe there is more to life than being an English-speaking taxi driver.

Ms Tia faces a patriarchal dilemma in the society that she lives in. Ms Tia is married to Dr Kenneth Dada, who is depicted as a civilised and loving husband. Ms Tia is pressured to give Dr Kenneth children. Dr Kenneth's mother states that it is Ms Tia's responsibility as a woman to provide Kenneth with children. Dr Kenneth's mother is portrayed as delusional and uneducated, as she fails to understand that it takes two genders to make children. She is also delusional to not understand

that infertility can occur in both males and females. However, Ms Tia is more radical and educated to know that womanhood is not equivalent to motherhood. Ms Tia states that people choose not to have children for various reasons. Ms Tia and her husband do not plan to have children; they only want to enjoy their marriage freely. Being educated allows Ms Tia and her husband to make their own choices.

Similarly, Adunni is faced with traditional constraints in her marriage to Morufu. Adunni states that in Ikati village, all adult women have children. Morufu marries her because his current wives struggle to give him a boy child. Adunni faced a painful experience in conceiving faster. When Morufu divides his weekly sleeping routine among his three wives, Adunni gets three days a week, Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, which is very long compared to the other wives. Lebake sleeps with Morufu for two nights, Wednesday and Thursday and Khadija on Fridays and Saturdays. Morufu thinks that Adunni, being his new wife with young blood, will make her quickly conceive a boy child. However, Adunni thinks differently and does not want her body to swell yearly just because Morufu wants a boy child. Adunni mentions that books and education must be the only things that swell her mind. Although Adunni is subjected to such living conditions, she fights for her future. Adunni teaches herself that there is more to a woman's life and that she has a right to choose what she wants. Hence, she drinks a mixture of strong leaves to avoid being pregnant with Morufu's child.

According to Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), Stiwanism maintains that the well-being of women's bodies and identities is a primary concern of African feminism issues. Patriarchal African families believe that infertility is a curse, specifically for women. In the novel, Ms Tia faces challenges in conceiving a baby when she had finally decided that she wanted one. In African societies, people believe that people who are struggling to conceive should go for cleansing to become pregnant (Hooks, 2002). It is evident in the novel when Ms Tia is brought to The Miracle Centre in Ikeja for cleansing. The doctor's mother believes that Ms Tia has an evil spirit that is swallowing the baby.

I watch as they whip, and whip and whip as Ms Tia is rolling on the ground and screaming until her delicate, smooth skin is punctured from the sand and until her whole body is becoming the red of the earth (2020:263).

Commenting on the above quote, Ms Tia goes through brutal experiences as she is believed to have an evil spirit of childlessness. This shows what a lack of education can do to human beings. Being uneducated makes this society think that the only way an infertile woman can give birth is through cleansing. They believe that women are the ones who need cleansing, as they are the ones responsible for carrying the baby. As patriarchal as it seems, it goes more profound to the extent that the community is not well educated on different conception methods that both men and women can explore, such as In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF), surrogacy and adoption. This method allows them to become mothers without experiencing traditional cleansing that can harm the human body. Adunni makes a powerful claim about why women in Nigeria suffer more than men.

Education can help people make good choices in their lives. In the novel, Ms Tia confesses that her husband, Doctor Kenneth, is the infertile one. She further mentions that Doctor Kenneth's mother does not know about her son's infertility. Regardless of being infertile, Doctor Kenneth uses his infertility as a motivation to be a fertility doctor and help other families to have children. Being educated allows him to understand what other families are going through. She understands the importance of family planning and decides to prevent it. Towards the end of the novel, both couples, Ms Tia and Doctor Kenneth, agree to adopt a child rather than find a new wife.

4.6 Voice as a Symbol of Expression

Stiwanism aims to challenge patriarchal systems that exclude African women. It also highlights the importance of breaking down oppressive frameworks and rethinking power relations. As stated by feminist theorist Bell Hooks (2014), feminism aims to eliminate sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. Stiwanism

expands on this concept, emphasising the interplay between gender and other social hierarchies, especially within marginalised communities. Adunni's voice, as depicted in the novel, represents not merely a personal talent but also a symbol of defiance against the dominant systems that aim to dominate and suppress her in patriarchal Nigerian society. Academics like Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984) contend that Stiwanism should continue to examine the connections between gender, class, race, and colonialism. It should also emphasise that women in the Global South face dual oppression from both patriarchy and imperial systems. Adunni's suffering is intensified by her gender, financial struggles, and absence of education. Throughout the novel, her voice serves as a platform for her to question the conventional roles allocated to her and resist the limitations imposed on her by a patriarchal society.

The protagonist's powerful voice symbolises her capacity for self-expression and independence. In the initial pages of the novel, Adunni contemplates how her voice is an asset she has, yet it is frequently muted or disregarded by those around her. From the beginning of the novel, Adunni's voice serves as a means of survival. She employs it to fulfil her father's desires, to carry out household tasks for her employers, and to navigate through the patriarchal system that restricts her options. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) famously claimed that one is not born a woman but becomes one, a notion that highlights how societal frameworks influence a woman's identity. Adunni's voice, much like her identity, is influenced by the gendered norms of her community. It is praised when it aligns with the needs of others, yet patriarchal standards mainly suppress its potential.

Her voice is objectified and restricted by her gender from the beginning. Her union with an older man, orchestrated by her father, illustrates how women's voices are frequently regarded as inferior to the desires of men. Adunni's father, who initially seems to be a kind person, forces her into this marriage for financial security. She informs her father of her desire for an education, but he dismissively replies that becoming a teacher will only give her a stubborn head. Her early silence, whether imposed or internalised, is slowly supplanted by a realisation of her capacity to

advocate for herself and seek more from life. This change becomes clear when Adunni meets Ms. Tia, a more forward-thinking person who motivates her to pursue an education. Pursuing education transforms into a revolutionary act, as her wish to learn is closely linked to her aim of expressing her ideas, dreams, and ambitions.

Her increasing literacy and ambition to learn English signify her developing capability to express her wants outside the limitations of gender expectations. Judith Butler (1990) argues that gender is performative and is constructed through recurring actions and language. For Adunni, her choice to pursue education represents a form of performative resistance, as she actively contests the notion that her voice is restricted to fulfilling the needs of others. This signifies a significant shift, as she utilises her voice as a tool for self-empowerment, in harmony with the Stiwanist concept of reclaiming personal agency. The final crucial aspect is the link between voice and social mobility. Adunni's path to advancement is closely linked to her pursuit of education.

Building on Bourdieu's (1984) capital framework, recent studies examine social mobility as a multidimensional structural process. As stated by Yang et al. (2023), social mobility is not solely an individual pursuit but a complicated process shaped by the capital (cultural, social, and economic) that an individual holds. She conceptualises mobility as a form of capital in its own right, quantifying the embodied, objectified, and institutionalised resources individuals gain through movement across social or geographic spaces. Carpentieri et al. (2023) demonstrate how economic, social, and cultural capital intersect in everyday contexts to shape career trajectories, highlighting the combined impact of tangible and intangible resources. Similarly, Kazmina et al. (2023) note that immobility often stems from restrictive social environments, where limited networks hinder access to crucial information and opportunities for upward movement. Adunni's path to advancement is closely linked to her pursuit of education. Her voice initially lacks significance because it is devalued in a system that perceives women as inferior to men. Nevertheless, through her resolve to acquire knowledge and to make her

voice heard, Adunni gains a unique form of cultural capital that enables her to overcome the challenges of class and gender.

The protagonist's voice is closely tied to her hopes for an improved existence. She conveys to Ms. Tia her conviction that education will allow her to communicate in ways that promote social mobility. She also believes that becoming a teacher will give girls in her village the value of education. Her voice confronts the societal framework that aims to confine her, reflecting the Stiwanist perspective that women's advancement in society is fundamentally linked to their capacity to articulate themselves and oppose patriarchal standards. Adunni's achievement in obtaining an education and striving for social mobility represents feminist defiance. Education serves not just to achieve financial security but also as a tool for her to manoeuvre through a system that, without her voice, would render her mute and restrict her to a domestic position. Through learning, she challenges the oppressive systems that have muted her, demonstrating how African women can utilise their voices to overcome any limitations.

Her journey of life illustrates how voice, representing self-expression and serving as a means for social advancement, is essential in her pursuit of independence and empowerment. Through reclaiming her voice, Adunni confronts the patriarchal structures that aim to mute her and illustrates how education can empower women to define their identities and seek social advancement. From a Stiwanist perspective, the novel demonstrates the transformative impact of voice in breaking down oppressive structures and promoting personal and social freedom. Her battle embodies a more exhaustive feminist examination of social systems that disenfranchise women, especially those from underprivileged, rural communities. By regaining her voice via education and self-expression, Adunni confronts her limitations and serves as a strong example of how women can utilise their voices to oppose gendered oppression and attain a more profound sense of agency. Abi Dare highlights the significance of women's voices in driving social change, portraying Adunni's voice as a representation of resistance, empowerment, and social advancement.

4.7 Conclusion

Stiwanism advocates for the restructuring of patterns that maintain sexist ideologies and behaviours between genders. Primarily, as a feminist theory, Stiwanism is based on advocating for the collaborative and collective involvement of society, with women playing an active role, in securing the change of gender, politics, and society broadly. Consistent with Rydström and Gill (2008), the perspective is that numerous development policies are often carried out to hinder women's liberation. Dare portrays that African women in African societies only have themselves to rely on for liberation. African women who are subjected to patriarchal conditions that discriminate and limit their opportunity to better themselves should stand and fight against such a system. This is supported by Aidoo (1988), who believes that the new generation of African women differs from ancient generations. The latest generation reacts and acts against any challenges that arise above them. New women act with strength, courage and determination to achieve their goals and dreams regardless of any challenge. This is successfully portrayed in Abi Dare's novel, which shows an honest depiction of real women with their foibles and insecurities.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter summarises the study's findings in connection with its aims, objectives, and key research questions. It revisits the central themes by examining the chosen texts, particularly how the notion of womanhood is re-conceived within the framework of a patriarchal African society. The chapter also suggests how the identified issues can be tackled or confronted through literary and socio-cultural paths. It also presents a concluding thought on how African feminist discourse, primarily through the perspective of Stiwanism, provides transformative resources for reconsidering gender roles and validating women's agency and sense of belonging.

5.2 Comparative analyses of the two selected texts

Firdaus and Adunni are female protagonists who experience life in profoundly patriarchal societies and face systemic oppression and violence. Even though they face common challenges, their methods of resistance and the results of their journeys show notable differences in their radicalism and aspirations for transformation. Both Firdaus and Adunni exist in societies where women are objectified and exposed to institutional mistreatment. The main character in *Woman at Point Zero* encounters physical abuse, coerced marriage, and exploitation as a sex worker. Similarly, Adunni in *The Girl with the Louding Voice* is sold into matrimony as a young bride and subsequently compelled into household labour. Their experiences illustrate the pervasive dominance men have over women's bodies and lives, along with the economic systems that perpetuate this oppression. Violence against women is a consistent motif in both novels, as Firdaus suffers beatings from her father, spouse, and pimp. At the same time, Adunni experiences physical mistreatment from her husband and verbal humiliation from her boss. These violent actions highlight the systemic characteristics of misogyny within their societies.

Even with these common challenges, both protagonists respond to oppression differently. Firdaus completely rejects societal standards and turns to prostitution as a means of freedom. Her act of murdering her pimp, Marzouk, symbolises a rejection of patriarchy and its entrenched violence. Firdaus' extremism stems from her total disenchantment with men and social systems, prompting her to support androicide as a means of freedom. Her deeds are boldly ruinous, establishing her as a symbol of feminist defiance that questions the core principles of patriarchal culture. In comparison, Adunni' method is more optimistic and aimed at reform. She avoids violence, opting instead to use her voice and resolve to confront societal norms. Her quest for education represents hope and change, resonating with African feminist principles that highlight gradual progress and unity with men. Adunni' hope starkly contrasts with Firdaus' hopelessness, as she believes in the potential for a brighter future through systemic changes.

Firdaus' challenges are positioned within a universal critique of patriarchy, capitalism, and religion, rendering her narrative a wider condemnation of societal structures. Adunni' struggles, though intersectional, are more specific, emphasising topics such as child marriage, domestic servitude, and educational access in Nigeria. Adunni's life emphasises the significance of community and joint efforts, while Firdaus' path is isolated and self-centred. Firdaus' extremism allows for no concession, and her tale concludes tragically with her execution, representing the ultimate price she pays for her convictions. Her passing serves as a criticism of the system and a mark of her unwillingness to fit in. In contrast, Adunni ends on an optimistic note, obtaining a scholarship and starting her path towards education and empowerment. Her story implies that change can occur within the system, providing a perspective of transformation through determination and endurance.

Both protagonists embody opposite extremes in the fight against patriarchal oppression through feminist resistance. Firdaus' extremism demands upheaval and revolution, whereas Adunni's reformist stance promotes transformation and empowerment through education. Both figures shed light on the challenges faced

by women in patriarchal societies, yet their contrasting journeys emphasise the various forms that resistance can take. Firdaus' tale acts as both a warning and a challenge to patriarchal norms, whereas Adunni' experience provides hope and a change model. Collectively, they offer an intricate examination of feminist agency within oppressive settings, demonstrating that resistance can manifest in various ways, ranging from radical defiance to reformist tenacity.

An unwavering quest for independence characterises Firdaus' experiences. Born into hardship and enduring genital mutilation, she navigates through a society that objectifies her body. Her journey from being a victim of exploitation to a woman who seizes control of her destiny reaches its peak with the act of murder, representing her final declaration of agency. Likewise, in *The Girl with the Louding Voice*, Adunni' desire for education symbolises breaking free from restricted and male-dominated surroundings. Although she is married at the age of fourteen and faces domestic violence, Adunni' resolve to learn and express her voice loudly becomes her means of self-freedom. Both protagonists in both novels illustrate that the fight for womanliness involves not just physical liberty but also the restoration of one's voice and identity within oppressive structures.

El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* depicts the harsh criticism of the patriarchal system that restricts women to positions of oppression. Firdaus' interactions with different men, including her uncle, her spouse, and her clients, underscore the widespread exploitation and commodification of women. Her act of killing is depicted not as a singular event but as a reaction to years of ongoing systemic mistreatment. Comparably, Daré's novel *The Girl with the Louding Voice* reveals the deep-rooted gender disparities within Nigerian society. Adunni' journey illustrates the societal constraints that restrict women's prospects and expressions. Her pursuit of education confronts the conventional standards defining a woman's role and purpose, promoting a reimagining of women's societal positions. Both novels highlight the importance of breaking down patriarchal systems to enable women to shape their own lives.

Education is a key theme in both stories, representing empowerment and defiance. Although Firdaus was denied formal education, she pursued knowledge through her experiences and observations, ultimately applying her understanding to navigate and confront the societal systems that oppressed her. Her self-learning serves as a way to resist the constraints placed upon her. Nevertheless, Adunni's life positions formal education as the central focus of her battle. Her resolve to acquire knowledge, despite many challenges, poses a direct threat to the cultural norms that aim to suppress and dominate women. For her, education transcends personal ambition; it is a transformative act that challenges the existing order. Both main characters demonstrate that education is not just an academic endeavour but a significant means for social transformation and individual freedom.

The selected novels also explore the intersection of oppression, emphasising how elements like class, gender, and societal norms intertwine to influence women's experiences. Firdaus' life illustrates how her financial struggles and gender combined to restrict her options, pushing her into harmful relationships. Her story offers a touching reflection on how societal systems push women to the margins, especially those from disadvantaged economic conditions. Adunni's experiences likewise illustrate the layered nature of oppression. Her position as a young, uneducated girl in a patriarchal society relegates her to the fringes, where her voice frequently goes unheard. Her experience highlights the importance of tackling the various dimensions of oppression to attain true equality. Both selected novels provide deep reflections on the experiences of women who, despite enduring significant oppression, discover ways to affirm their autonomy and confront societal expectations. Both authors, El Saadawi and Daré emphasise women's resilience while advocating for a reassessment of the systems that sustain inequality. These chosen novels are potent reminders of the necessity of providing women with the resources, whether education, a voice, or independence, to shape their futures.

5.3 Summary

The primary aim of this research was to rewrite and reclaim the literary representation of African womanhood, concentrating specifically on how gender roles and societal norms sustain the subjugation of women. Employing Stiwanism (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) as a theoretical lens, the research examined how African women in chosen novels portray the challenges of womanhood amid repressive patriarchal systems. Both writings, created by African women, present strong counter-narratives that emphasise female agency, resistance, and expression. The objective of the study was to investigate how chosen texts depict the challenges of womanhood in a male-dominated African society. Both protagonists confront systemic oppression through institutions like marriage, religion, and education. These organisations not only hinder their individual development but also function as tools through which patriarchal societies suppress and take advantage of women. Firdaus's experience depicts the severe psychological and physical abuse that women can face. In contrast, Adunni's narrative emphasises the ongoing fight for education and autonomy among young girls in contemporary African settings.

The second goal was to examine how the main characters' experiences mirror and contest conventional gender roles, expectations, and systems of oppression. Both female protagonists defy the roles assigned to them by patriarchal societies. Firdaus rejects societal expectations while Adunni shows commitment to education. This research indicated that, although both main characters suffer due to their situations, they also represent acts of rebellion that challenge the stories of submissive femininity. Their voices play a crucial role in questioning the legitimacy and permanence of designated gender roles.

The third objective was to examine the psychological and socio-political threats of gender-based oppression as illustrated in the chosen texts. Lastly, the fourth objective was to determine how female characters embrace their womanhood through education, voice and resistance in pursuit of their selfhood. This study revealed that enforced gender norms lead to both external constraints and

internalised trauma, along with emotional pain. Firdaus' mental collapse and ultimate uprising against male power represent the total impact of a life characterised by gender-based violence. In the same way, Adunni's determination and defiance, despite emotional and psychological challenges, highlight the enduring effect of patriarchy on young African girls' self-image and possibilities.

This research confirmed that the experiences of oppression faced by African women are varied and context-dependent, shaped by overlapping factors like class, education, age, and location. However, through literature, African women authors are redefining prevailing narratives to focus on female empowerment, defiance, and a sense of community. This research fulfilled its goals by providing a detailed literary analysis that revealed gendered oppression systems while honouring the bravery and strength of African women who persistently challenge these forces. This research aims to investigate the reimagining of African femininity and identity through the perspective of Stiwanism in the selected novels. Using a STIWANIST literary lens, the study explored how both novels portray women's experiences in heavily patriarchal societies, while presenting radical reconceptualisations of female identity, resistance, and social change.

The study showed that patriarchy in both works operates as an all-encompassing and aggressive framework that specifies the conditions of womanhood through dominance, suppression, and the negation of autonomy. Firdaus and Adunni, the main characters of the two novels, face distinct yet equally oppressive circumstances that aim to push them to the margins. However, both characters confront these circumstances in ways that affirm their individuality. Firdaus represents a radical, though tragic, defiance by rejecting societal and religious conventions. Conversely, Adunni embodies a more optimistic story rooted in perseverance, the quest for knowledge, and restoring her voice.

This study has critically explored the dilemmas of womanhood in the selected texts, employing STIWANISM (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) as its primary theoretical framework. Coined by Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Stiwanism offers a distinctively African feminist lens that privileges the socio-

cultural, historical, and economic specificities of African women's lived realities. Unlike Western feminist paradigms that often universalise female oppression, Stiwanism insists on contextual analysis, addressing how colonial legacies, religious doctrines, class disparities, and indigenous patriarchy intersect to shape women's experiences. It is within this intersectional framework that Firdaus and Adunni are examined, not as isolated characters, but as representations of the broader struggles facing African women.

Firdaus' journey is emblematic of institutional betrayal and the violent costs of female resistance in a society where male dominance is enforced through religion, marriage, and sexual control. Her radical refusal to be complicit in her own objectification represents a form of agency that, though tragic, disrupts patriarchal power. Adunni, by contrast, embodies resilience and a forward-looking spirit; her quest for education becomes an act of resistance that aligns with Stiwanism's commitment to transforming society through the inclusion and empowerment of women. Stiwanism also foregrounds the necessity of listening to women's voices and stories as tools for collective liberation. Both texts function as literary critiques of patriarchal systems and contribute to a growing feminist archive that reclaims narrative authority for African women. Their voices challenge dominant representations of African womanhood, pushing back against the silencing mechanisms that have long defined women's roles in both literature and society.

This study argues that El Saadawi and Daré offer powerful and complementary visions of resistance and transformation. *Woman at Point Zero* critiques a society that punishes female autonomy. The *Girl with the Louding Voice* gestures toward a future where that autonomy is made possible through education and solidarity. Both narratives reflect the core tenets of Stiwanism: the need for social transformation, the centrality of women's experiences, and the redefinition of womanhood beyond victimhood or domesticity. Together, these texts call for reimagining African societies, where women are not merely included but valued as full participants in shaping cultural, political, and intellectual life.

These selected novels underscore that the personal is deeply political, especially for African women whose bodies and voices are often battlegrounds for cultural, religious, and economic control. By centring marginalised female experiences, both novels compel readers to confront uncomfortable truths about systemic injustice. They also highlight the power of storytelling as a form of resistance and a tool for social transformation. In doing so, El Saadawi and Daré reclaim womanhood from the margins and inscribe it firmly at the heart of African feminist discourse. In conclusion, by applying Stiwanism as a theoretical lens, this study affirms that African women's literature is crucial for feminist intervention, resistance, and vision. Through *Firdaus* and *Adunni*, El Saadawi and Daré offer distinct yet deeply interconnected portrayals of the dilemmas of womanhood. These portrayals challenge oppressive norms and envision new possibilities for freedom, voice, and agency in contemporary Africa.

5.4 Recommendations

This research sought to redefine the notion of womanhood influenced by patriarchal beliefs and to examine how these beliefs impact women's physical, emotional, and psychological health, especially regarding their sense of belonging, educational goals, and social identity. By closely analysing the selected novels, the study explored how African female authors redefine the narrative of African womanhood, transcending the limitations of restrictive gender roles. Employing Stiwanism as a theoretical perspective was crucial for framing the conversation within an African feminist framework that acknowledges women's agency, real-life experiences, and the necessity for social change that encompasses women. Patriarchal structures like marriage, religion, and the education system continue to act as key means by which gendered norms are upheld. These organisations typically characterise women by their capacity to care for others, bear children, and stay quiet, all while pretending to adhere to socially accepted roles.

Both selected texts analysed a complete rejection of these roles and provide fresh opportunities for women's self-definition, independence, and defiance. African

literature, especially from male writers, should progress beyond superficial portrayals of women and capture the intricate, lived realities of female experiences in patriarchal environments. Male authors should strive to be more deliberate in depicting women's internal conflicts and silenced voices, instead of upholding conventional gender binaries. Furthermore, the research supports a united dismissal of inflexible gender roles that have traditionally not benefited women. It advocates for re-evaluating African womanhood, empowering women to independently shape their identities and be grounded in their personal experiences, aspirations, and circumstances. If a woman embraces traditional roles, it should arise from her choice rather than external societal influence.

This research also suggests that greater academic emphasis should be directed towards examining works by African female authors, as their stories frequently extend beyond mere representation and serve as instruments for resistance and redefinition. In future studies, a wider range of literary works should be examined to understand better how various African contexts, histories, and socio-political factors influence women's struggles and resistance in patriarchal African societies. The results of this research create opportunities for broader literary involvement across different areas and writers. Upcoming research may include more modern perspectives and examine intersectional elements like class, disability, language, and religion that enhance or complicate the challenges of womanhood. Therefore, this study suggests that African literature should persist as a platform for advocacy, resistance, and freedom for African women.

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