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Voices of Resilience: Womanism and Intersectionality in El Saadawi's Woman at Point Zero (1977) and Adichie's Purple Hibiscus (2003)

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Abstract
This paper investigates African women's literature as a site of resistance against entrenched systems of oppression, including patriarchy, colonial legacies, and socio-economic marginalization. Using African and Black womanist frameworks—particularly Obioma Nnaemeka's nego-feminism, Chikwenye Ogunyemi's African womanism, Alice Walker's womanist philosophy, and Mary E. Modupe Kolawole's negotiated empowerment—the study challenges universalist feminist paradigms that often disregard African women's cultural and historical contexts. Methodologically, the paper employs comparative literary analysis of Nawal El Saadawi's Woman at Point Zero and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus (2003). The findings demonstrate that African women writers articulate agency through negotiation, communal ethics, and culturally embedded survival strategies rather than confrontational resistance. Firdaus's rebellion in El Saadawi's novel exposes the pervasive patriarchal and political oppression of Egyptian society, while Kambili's gradual assertion of independence in Adichie's (2003) work highlights subtler forms of emotional and spiritual dominance within postcolonial Nigerian family and religious structures. Both texts foreground the female body and voice as central to resistance and self-definition, celebrating resilience and transformative potential. The study concludes that African women's literature contributes to a broader womanist discourse that critiques gendered subjugation while envisioning emancipatory possibilities rooted in culture, community, and ethical responsibility. These insights underscore the importance of recognizing diverse, context-specific models of empowerment in feminist scholarship.

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Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Introduction

African women's writing has long been considered as a great space for articulating resistance to intersecting systems of oppression such as patriarchy, colonial influence, religious authority, and socio-economic marginalization. Rather than simply reflecting reality, these texts actively challenge structures that silence women and limit their agency (Yacob-Haliso & Falola, 2021). Many scholars note that African women's literature reflects the complexity of lived experiences shaped by culture, history, and social expectations, while also offering alternative ways of understanding gender and identity (Achebe, 2013; Amadiume et al., 2024). Within postcolonial contexts, literature becomes a site where women negotiate identity and power in culturally grounded ways. As Nnaemeka (2004) explains, resistance is often expressed through negotiation and strategic engagement, a pattern reflected in many African literary texts. Thus, African women's fiction functions both as a reflection of reality and as a form of cultural and political resistance.

Obioma Nnaemeka's idea of "nego-feminism," or African womanist thought, explains that women in African societies often seek equality through negotiation rather than open confrontation. This approach does not reject social systems completely; instead, it works within them using dialogue, patience, and relationships to bring gradual change. In simple terms, it focuses on cooperation and adjustment as ways to improve women's lives. This understanding of African feminism is also reflected in recent studies that show how women shape their identities by balancing cultural expectations with personal agency (Akheituame, 2026). In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus's life reflects this idea. She tries to survive within oppressive systems by accepting situations such as marriage or prostitution, but she eventually rejects them when they become unbearable. Her experiences show both negotiation and resistance, which align with the idea that African feminism involves strategy, endurance, and gradual change.

Chikwenye Ogunyemi presents African womanism as a perspective that connects women's freedom to family, culture, and shared history. This challenges some Western feminist ideas that may ignore the everyday realities of African women. Instead of focusing on complete separation from society, this view shows that women can find strength within relationships and community life. Similarly, Alice Walker defines womanism as a commitment to the "survival and wholeness" of both women and men, emphasizing shared growth and collective well-being. These ideas are also supported by discussions of gender within the context of ongoing colonial and neocolonial influences, where women's roles are shaped by both historical and social forces (Onuoha, 2025). Together, these perspectives show that African women's resistance is often grounded in care, responsibility, and strong social connections, rather than direct opposition alone.

The purpose of this paper is to explore African female fiction as a form of struggle against interconnecting structures of oppression, such as patriarchy, colonial influence, and socio-economic marginalization. Taking African and Black womanist theories as a framework of this study – such as Obioma Nnaemeka's nego-feminism, Ogunyemi (1985) African womanism, Walker's womanist thought, and Mary E. Modupe Kolawole's concept of negotiated empowerment – the paper critiques feminist models that universalize women's experiences and neglect the historical and cultural contexts of African women. Through a comparative reading of *Woman at Point Zero* and *Purple Hibiscus*, this paper attempts to illustrate how African women writers seeks their independence through negotiation, communal ethics, and culturally grounded survival strategies rather than purely aggressive confrontation. For example, Firdaus's essential defiance in El Saadawi's novel depicts the violent intersection of patriarchal, religious, and political oppression in Egyptian society, while Kambili's continuing awakening in Adichie's work discloses indirect types of emotional and spiritual control within the family and church in postcolonial Nigeria. By locating the female body and voice into spaces of resistance and self-definition, both novels encourage female subjectivity and emphasize the resilience and transformative power of African womanhood. The remaining of the articles aims to offer a theoretical framework. In addition, the paper aims to deal with the following womanist ideas as echoed in El Saadawi's and Adichie's selected novels. These ideas are: (1) womanist resistance and negotiated empowerment within African contexts; (2) radical defiance and truth-telling in Woman at Point Zero and Purple Hibiscus, with particular attention to the female body as a contested site of control and resistance; the womanist self through intersectional empowerment, illustrating how womanist resistance is deeply shaped by lived experience. In doing so, it aligns with recent decolonial feminist scholarship that calls for re-centering African epistemologies and lived realities in gender analysis (Postcolonial Studies; (Ballestrin, 2022; Okonkwo, 2025).

Through a comparative reading of *Woman at Point Zero* and *Purple Hibiscus*, this study demonstrates how African women articulate resistance not primarily through direct confrontation, but through negotiation, relational ethics, and culturally grounded survival strategies. Firdaus's radical defiance in Nawal El Saadawi's novel exposes the violent convergence of patriarchal, political, and religious oppression, while Kambili's gradual awakening in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's work reveals more subtle forms of domination within family and religious institutions. By foregrounding the female body and voice as sites of resistance and self-definition, both texts highlight the resilience and transformative potential of African womanhood.

Accordingly, the paper examines womanist resistance, negotiated empowerment, and intersectional identity formation as key dimensions of African feminist expression.

Literature Review:

Recent studies on African women's writing show that feminism in Africa must be understood within its own cultural and historical context. Scholars agree that African feminism should not simply follow or copy Western ideas. Instead, it should reflect the real lives, cultures, and experiences of African women. Over time, African feminist thought has moved away from general or universal approaches and now focuses more on differences in culture, history, and identity. For example, Nkiru Nzegwu and others argue that African feminist ideas must be rooted in local traditions and knowledge systems (Amadiume et al., 2024). Similarly, Achebe (2013) explains that African women writers play an important role in showing the diversity of women's experiences across the continent. In the same way, Oyewumi (1997) argues that Western ideas of gender do not always fit African societies. More recent research by Lomotey (2024) also shows that African women writers from different generations use different feminist ideas depending on their local contexts and changing realities.

African feminist and womanist theories often challenge Western feminist ideas, especially those that focus only on individual freedom. Instead, African scholars highlight the importance of family, community, and social relationships. Ogunyemi (1985) introduced African womanism, which focuses on women's roles within their cultural and social environments. In a similar way, Walker (1983) describes womanism as a way of thinking that supports the well-being of the whole community. Stratton (1994) also explains that gender in African literature is closely connected to social and political conditions. In addition, Nkealah (2016) points out that African feminisms face challenges, such as balancing tradition and modernity. Mollett and Faria (2018) further show that Africana womanism expands feminism by including issues like health, environment, and community well-being. Edwin (2008) also explains that African feminist theory presents Muslim women as active individuals who balance education, work, and cultural expectations. Moreover, Nfah-Abbenyi (2005) stresses the importance of using postcolonial feminist approaches to understand how colonial history has shaped gender roles and identities.

A key idea in African womanist theory is negotiation. Nnaemeka (2004) introduces nego-feminism, which focuses on negotiation and compromise instead of direct confrontation. This idea shows how African women often create change by working within their cultural systems rather than openly opposing them. This reflects the daily lives of many women who must balance resistance with survival. Other studies support this idea, showing that African feminism is flexible and context-based (Akheituame, 2026; Amadiume et al., 2024). Nhengu (2022) also explains that gender roles are influenced by African traditional religions. Bailey (2025) adds that feminist and womanist ideas can work together, especially in literary texts like *Everything Good Will Come*, where women's experiences show both resistance and cooperation. In addition, postcolonial and decolonial feminist studies explain how colonial and neo-colonial systems continue to affect gender relations. For example, Ballestrin (2022), Okonkwo (2025), and Onuoha (2025) show that African feminism must address issues such as history, sexuality, and decolonization, and give voice to marginalized groups.

Moreover, research shows how African women express agency and resistance in everyday life. For example, Imas and Garcia-Lorenzo (2023) study women entrepreneurs in Zimbabwe and show how they deal with economic challenges through creative strategies. Similarly, Akheituame (2026) explains how young Nigerian women build their feminist identities by combining modern ideas with traditional values. These studies show that resistance is not always direct; it often includes negotiation, adaptation, and careful decision-making. In literature, African women's writing is an important space for both creativity and resistance. Literary texts allow women to express their experiences, challenge social norms, and imagine new identities. Spacks (2022) explains that women's writing uses imagination to question traditional gender roles. Achebe (2013) also highlights that African women writers have changed literary traditions by bringing women's voices to the center and addressing issues such as identity and oppression. Lomotey (2024) adds that new generations of writers continue to reshape feminist ideas to fit modern realities.

Literature also plays an important role in showing gender-based violence and women's strength. Fourqurean (2024) explains that literary works reveal how violence against women is connected to larger social and political systems. Similarly, Donert (2022) shows that women's struggles are linked to global political movements and historical changes. These studies suggest that gender oppression is both personal and structural. Nkealah (2016) and Mollett and Faria (2018) further show that gender inequality is shaped by many factors, including culture, politics, and history. Overall, this research shows that African women's resistance is complex and cannot be explained by one single theory. It is influenced by culture, history, religion, politics, and economics. African feminist and womanist theories help explain how women create change while staying connected to their communities. This background is important for studying literary works such as *Woman at Point Zero* and *Purple Hibiscus*, where women show resistance in different ways, including both direct defiance and gradual empowerment. By using African womanist and decolonial

approaches, this research contributes to ongoing discussions about identity, agency, and resistance in African women's literature.

Methodology:

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on comparative literary analysis to examine how African women's literature represents resistance, identity, and agency within culturally specific contexts. The analysis is grounded in African and Black womanist theoretical frameworks, which provide a context-sensitive lens for interpreting female experiences in postcolonial societies. In particular, the study draws on Obioma Nnaemeka's concept of nego-feminism, which conceptualizes resistance as a process of negotiation, compromise, and relational engagement rather than direct confrontation (Nnaemeka, 2004). This approach is especially relevant for understanding how African women navigate oppressive structures in ways that align with their cultural realities. In addition, the study incorporates Ogunyemi (1985) concept of African womanism, which situates women's liberation within the intersections of gender, race, culture, and family. Ogunyemi challenges Western feminist paradigms that prioritize individual autonomy at the expense of communal values, instead emphasizing relational identity and social responsibility. This perspective is complemented by Walker (1983) definition of womanism, which underscores the "survival and wholeness of entire people" and highlights spirituality, cultural specificity, and collective well-being as central to women's empowerment (Deyab, 2011). Furthermore, the study employs Kolawole (1997) concept of "negotiated empowerment," which conceptualizes resistance as a strategic engagement with oppressive systems rather than their complete rejection. Together, these frameworks form an integrated theoretical model that enables a nuanced understanding of African women's resistance as adaptive, relational, and culturally grounded.

Data Collection

The primary data for this study consist of two selected African novels: Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. These texts are intentionally chosen because of their significant engagement with themes of gender oppression, resistance, and identity within African socio-cultural contexts. Both novels provide rich narrative representations of women's experiences under patriarchal, religious, and socio-political constraints, making them suitable for comparative analysis. Secondary data include a wide range of scholarly sources, such as books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and recent studies in African feminist and womanist theory. These sources provide the theoretical and critical foundation necessary to contextualize the analysis and support the interpretation of the selected texts. Emphasis is placed on incorporating both foundational works and recent scholarship (2020–2026) to ensure a balanced and up-to-date academic framework.

Data Analysis Techniques

The study employs thematic and interpretive analysis to examine how resistance, identity, and agency are constructed in the selected texts. Key themes—such as negotiated resistance, the female body as a site of control and empowerment, and intersectional identity—are identified and analyzed in relation to the theoretical frameworks guiding the study. The analysis is conducted through close reading, focusing on narrative structure, characterization, language, and symbolism. Particular attention is given to how female characters negotiate oppressive conditions and assert agency within their specific cultural contexts. Firdaus and Kambili, the central protagonists of the selected novels, are analyzed as representative figures of different modes of resistance—radical defiance and gradual empowerment. By applying womanist theories to textual analysis, the study interprets literary representations as reflections of broader socio-cultural realities. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how African women's literature transforms the female body and voice into sites of resistance and meaning-making. Ultimately, the analytical framework highlights the diversity and complexity of African women's strategies of empowerment, emphasizing that resistance is shaped by context, culture, and lived experience.

Results and Discussion:

El Saadawi and Adichie: Womanist Resistance and Negotiated Empowerment in African Contexts:

Within the womanist theoretical framework adopted in this study, (El Saadawi, 1984; El Saadawi & Hetata, 2015; El Saadawi & Morgan, 1984) emerges as a foundational figure whose intellectual and literary project exemplifies culturally grounded resistance to intersecting systems of patriarchy, political authoritarianism, and socio-religious control. El Saadawi is a famous Egyptian writer and activist who seeks to make Arab women's lived experiences at the center of her writings, illustrating how gender oppression functions at the same time at the institutional levels. Her work echoes strongly African womanist thought and Walker's explanation of womanism as an obligation to "the survival and wholeness of entire people, male

and female" (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* xi). Through her writing, El Saadawi attempts to break down the oppressive political and social systems that keep women under oppression, especially those rooted in social values and oppressive political authority.

Making use of her medical training and personal experiences, El Saadawi explains how women's bodies and voices are used as means of oppression. Her major works – *Woman at Point Zero* (1977), *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1977), and *A Daughter of Isis* (1999) – clearly replicate a womanist form of resistance by connecting women's suffering to deep structural grounds rather than individual failure. In *A Daughter of Isis*, El Saadawi and Morgan (1984) recalls becoming aware of gender inequality at an early age, noting that "the life of women remained for me a strange thing, surrounded in mystery" (p. 87); a statement that echoes her lifelong effort to uncover how women's oppression operates at a systemic level.

Moreover, El Saadawi illustrates how women suffer, what Nnaemeka (2004) describes, as double oppression, as they suffer under both state institutions and private patriarchal control. She indicates that women "bore a double burden" created by these overlapping forces (El Saadawi, 1984). Her powerful pictures of her female characters' lives filled with exhaustion and pain turn personal experience into a wider political critique. From a womanist perspective, El Saadawi's treatment of cultural practices such as female genital mutilation, forced marriage, and sexual repression exposes how the female body becomes a site of political power and control. At the same time, her portrayal of women who resist and refuse submission supports Kolawole's idea of "negotiated empowerment," presenting resistance as something rooted in culture and ethics rather than imposed from outside.

Similarly, Adichie plays an important role in contemporary African womanist thought through her thoughtful portrayal of gender, culture, and power. Like El Saadawi, her fictional writings echo womanist principles that highlight cultural specificity, intersectionality, and communal responsibility over confrontational European feminist prototypes. In her various fictional writings such as Adichie (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and *Americanah* (2013), Adichie portrays African women as complex subjects navigating patriarchal family structures, colonial legacies, and global inequalities. In this way, her writings reflect Ogunyemi's African womanism, in placing women's freedom within the accompanying worlds of family, race, and culture (Ogunyemi 65), while, also, replicating (Walker, 1983) focus on voice, honesty, and the well-being of the whole community (p. xi). As a matter of fact, Adichie's female protagonists resist not just by openly defying their patriarchal authority, but through education, emotional growth, and ethical self-assertion, displaying resistance as a gradual process rooted in gender relationships.

Adichie's womanist belief is clear in her call for women's justice, most notably in her TED talk *We Should All Be Feminists*, where she reconsiders feminism in ways that relate to African social realities and historical contexts. Her criticism of Western feminism's ignorance of African women's realities and African patriarchy's suppression of female agency situates her firmly within a womanist and *nego-feminist* tradition that values dialogue, negotiation, and collective uplift (Nnaemeka, 2004). For example, in *Purple Hibiscus*, Kambili's steady freedom demonstrates this negotiated empowerment, illuminating how resistance can unfold within familial and religious structures rather than through their total rejection. By mixing literary representation with social critique, Adichie (2003) extends the womanist legacy articulated by writers such as (El Saadawi, 1984; Walker, 1983), contributing to an international African womanist discourse that defies gendered subjugation while envisaging transformative possibilities ingrained in culture, community, and ethical responsibility.

Direct Confrontation and Gradual Resistance in Woman at Point Zero and Purple Hibiscus:

In *Purple Hibiscus* and *Woman at Point Zero*, both Adichie and El Saadawi show how women suffer under male control, but they resist in different ways. For example, in *Woman at Point Zero*, El Saadawi shows how religion is used by men to excuse violence and control women. From childhood, Firdaus learns that obedience matters more than her safety or dignity. Her uncle's wife teaches that "men well versed in their religion… beat their wives" and that "a virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience" (El Saadawi, 1984). Because of this, abuse is presented as something correct and religious, not cruel. Firdaus also learns to hate her own body, saying, "I was made to feel that my body was a source of shame" (El Saadawi, 1984). Later, when she marries, her husband uses religion again to control her, insisting that "God has decreed that a woman must obey her husband(El Saadawi, 1984). Firdaus eventually understands that religion is being used as a tool of power, realizing that "the words of men of religion were identical with the words of my uncle, and of my husband" (El Saadawi, 1984). In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie (2003) presents a similar connection between religion and violence through Papa Eugene, whose religious beliefs allow him to dominate his family. The novel opens with the line, "Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion," (Adichie, 2003) showing how Catholic rules govern family life from the start. Like Firdaus, Kambili grows up in a home where religion justifies fear and silence.

At first, Firdaus believes that silence is the only way to survive. She explains, "I kept silent, for silence was my only weapon" (El Saadawi, 1984). Yet silence does not protect her; instead, it allows abuse to continue. At her lowest point, Firdaus feels completely disconnected from her own body, describing herself as

"surrounded by darkness on all sides" and wondering, "Had my body changed? Had I been transported into another woman's body? And where had my own, my real body, gone?" (El Saadawi, 1984). This moment shows how repeated violence has stripped her of her sense of self. However, it also marks a turning point—she is "no longer afraid" (El Saadawi, 1984). In *Purple Hibiscus*, resistance develops more slowly. Kambili describes how silence shapes her family life, revealing that "we spoke with our spirits, not with our lips." Unlike Firdaus's sudden break from fear, Kambili's voice grows little by little through exposure to Aunty Ifeoma's household, where laughter, debate, and freedom exist. Both novels show silence as a survival tactic, but only Firdaus reaches a moment where silence fully collapses into defiance.

As Firdaus grows older, she realizes that patriarchy controls all parts of society, not just the home. At work, she observes that "a female employee is more afraid of losing her job than a prostitute is of losing her life" (El Saadawi, 1984). She also concludes that marriage itself is a form of exploitation, stating that "the lowest paid body is that of a wife" (El Saadawi, 1984). Even morality is twisted in favor of power, since "virtue… was looked upon as stupidity" (El Saadawi, 1984). Firdaus's resistance becomes direct and final when she kills Marzouk and refuses to feel fear again, declaring, "the word impossible does not exist for me" (El Saadawi, 1984). Later, she explains why her voice threatens authority: "It is my truth which frightens them" (El Saadawi, 1984). When she refuses a pardon and says, "I hope for nothing, I want for nothing, I fear nothing. I am free" El Saadawi (1984), she chooses control over her own fate. In contrast, *Purple Hibiscus* ends with hope rooted in survival and healing rather than death. Jaja's imprisonment and Kambili's growing voice suggest that freedom can come slowly. Together, the novels show two paths of resistance: Firdaus's direct confrontation through refusal and death, and Kambili's gradual resistance through voice, endurance, and growth.

Likewise, in Purple Hibiscus, Adichie (2003) indicates how patriarchy uses religion to silence women, though resistance develops more gradually. Kambili grows up in a home controlled by her father, Eugene Achike, whose Catholic faith is used to rationalize violence. Fear rules Eugene's family, and Kambili explains how "silence hung over the table like the blue-black clouds in the middle of rainy season" (Adichie, 2003). Keeping silent is her way of being, educating Kambili that talking is dangerous. Eugene presents himself as a good man, yet his conduct at home exposes deep hypocrisy. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Eugene is respected in public because he speaks against corruption. Kambili says that "his pen would not, could not, stop writing the truth" Adichie (2003), which shows how society sees him as a good and brave man. However, inside his home, Eugene is violent and controlling. Religion helps him excuse his behavior, just as religion is used against Firdaus. In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus is taught that "a virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband" and that her "duty was perfect obedience" (El Saadawi, 1984). Both women live in systems where religion supports male authority instead of protecting women. While Firdaus realizes this early and becomes angry, Kambili first believes that pain means love.

The difference between the two characters appears in how they resist. Firdaus resists directly and violently when she finally refuses to obey. She says she was "surrounded by darkness on all sides" but was "no longer afraid" (El Saadawi, 1984), showing that fear no longer controls her:

I was surrounded by darkness on all sides, with nowhere to go, but I was no longer afraid. Nothing in the streets was capable of scaring me any longer, and the coldest wind could no longer bite into my body. Had my body changed? Had I been transported into another woman's body? And where had my own, my real body, gone? (El Saadawi, 1984)

This passage shows Firdaus's transformation from fear to resilience, as she no longer feels threatened by the darkness or the cold. Her detachment from her physical body reflects both trauma and liberation, suggesting she has transcended the pain once tied to her flesh. It marks a turning point where she questions her identity, embodying a new self that resists oppression and fear.

Unlike, Firdaus, Kambili's resistance is slower and quieter. It begins when she visits Nsukka and sees a different way of life with Aunty Ifeoma. Kambili explains that "Nsukka started it all… [It] began to lift the silence" (Adichie, 2003). Aunty Ifeoma encourages speaking out and warns against silence, asking, "When do we speak out?" (Adichie, 2003). For Kambili, freedom grows through voice and confidence, symbolized by the purple hibiscus, which is described as "rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom(Adichie, 2003). Together, the novels show two paths of resistance: Firdaus chooses direct confrontation, while Kambili learns to resist slowly by learning to speak. Unlike Firdaus, Kambili does not reject life to have freedom. Instead, her resistance grows through talking, imagination, and hope. While Firdaus achieves freedom through radical refusal, Kambili moves toward freedom through survival and healing. Together, the two novels show that truth-telling – whether loud and final or quiet and gradual – is dangerous because it exposes the systems that rely on women's silence. In both texts, speaking the truth becomes the most powerful form of resistance against patriarchy.

The Female Body as a Site of Resistance:

In Woman at Point Zero, Firdaus's body is the principal site where patriarchy dominates her life, but it

is also where her resistance begins. From her childhood life, men choose what happens to her body – how it is punished, used, sold, and judged. Almost at the end of the novel, Firdaus makes a strong declaration when she says, "My body at least is mine" (El Saadawi, 1984). Firdaus' assertion is really significant because it shows her full awareness that everything else in her life has been taken from her – freedom, safety, and choice – but her body is the last thing she can still control. Moreover, Firdaus' statement directly challenges a culture that considers female bodies as things controlled by patriarchal figures such a father or a husband. She, also, makes clear that her body was shaped by society long before she could make her own choices. When she says, "I am not a prostitute … they taught me to grow up as a prostitute" (El Saadawi, 1984), she rejects the notion that being a whore is a moral failing. Instead, she shows that poverty, violence, and male control forced her into abuse. The word "taught" shifts responsibility away from her and the social patriarchal system that oppresses women and at the same time claiming to defend them.

After murdering Marzouk, Firdaus gains even more control over her body and becomes more courageous in speaking out her oppression. For example, when she is in jail, she never lies, begs, or asks for forgiveness, knowing that her reality exposes the oppressive system (El Saadawi, 1984). Her refusal to be pardoned reveals her final control about her body and fate. Even though she is aware that the state will execute her, it cannot make her submit or feel fear. Her execution becomes a last act of autonomy: her body may be ruined, but it is no longer controlled by patriarchy.

Similarly, in *Purple Hibiscus*, Beatrice's body shows how patriarchy operates through violence, though her resistance is quieter. Eugene's repeated beatings harm her physically, including the loss of her unborn child. She tells her children, "There was an accident, the baby is gone" Adichie (2003), using calm, vague language to hide the truth, reflecting how dangerous it is for women to speak openly in abusive homes. Beatrice's body bears the costs of Eugene's control, and silence becomes necessary for survival. Over time, her endurance turns into resistance: when she intends to poison Eugene, she uses the same body that was once controlled to take back power. Unlike Firdaus, she does not openly claim ownership over her body, but her action speaks for her. In both novels, the female body is a battleground – first used to enforce control, and later reclaimed as a tool of resistance. While Firdaus fights back loudly and openly, Beatrice resists quietly and tactically. However, both convert their bodies from sites of oppression into objects of rebelliousness.

Negotiated Resistance in Purple Hibiscus and Woman at Point Zero:

Kambili's journey in *Purple Hibiscus* unfolds gradually within communal spaces that nurture her growth, reflecting Obioma Nnaemeka's concept of nego-feminism. Nnaemeka (2004) defines this framework as "the feminism of negotiation; no-ego feminism," (p. 5) which emphasizes compromise and dialogue rather than direct confrontation. It highlights how African women navigate patriarchal structures by bargaining and mediating within cultural contexts to achieve justice, prioritizing collective well-being and relational ethics over individualism. Adichie dramatizes this idea through her female characters, who resist patriarchy by negotiating survival rather than openly defying it. Beatrice, for example, endures Eugene's violence in silence, but her decision to poison him is a calculated act of protection. She tells her children, "I had to protect my children. I had to protect myself" Adichie (2003), showing how her resistance is framed within her role as wife and mother. Aunty Ifeoma embodies "no-ego feminism" by raising her children with independence and encouraging Kambili to find her voice. When she tells Kambili, "Being defiant can sometimes be good. It shows you are thinking for yourself" (Adichie, 2003), she models how negotiation can empower women without severing cultural ties. Kambili herself learns to negotiate her identity in Ifeoma's household. Instead of rebelling outright against her father, she asserts herself in subtle ways, whispering to Jaja, "We did it. We spoke" after daring to talk back (Adichie, 2003). These moments illustrate how Adichie presents nego-feminism as resistance through compromise, relational strength, and cultural grounding.

At home, Kambili lives under Eugene Achike's authority, which combines patriarchy, religious extremism, and colonial influence. Aunty Ifeoma calls him "a colonial product" Adichie (2003), underscoring how missionary influence reinforces rigid control. In this environment, silence becomes survival; Kambili recalls, "We spoke more with our spirits than with our lips" (Adichie, 2003). Her resistance at this stage is inward, shaped by oppression that forces her to navigate safety through silence. This begins to shift when she visits Nsukka, where Aunty Ifeoma's home offers open conversation, shared meals, and spiritual diversity (Adichie, 2003). There, Kambili learns that resistance can grow through adaptation and relational negotiation. The purple hibiscus, described as "rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom(Adichie, 2003), symbolizes a freedom nurtured within culture, echoing nego-feminist empowerment. By the time she experiences the "lifting of the silence" Adichie (2003), Kambili has begun to assert herself—speaking, expressing affection, and defending Jaja – while still maintaining her family ties and Catholic faith.

On the other hand, *Woman at Point Zero* presents a form of resistance that is direct and uncompromising. Firdaus grows up in a system that allows no negotiation. Her body is controlled by men, money, and social institutions, and she experiences violence normalized by culture and religion (El Saadawi, 1984). Even brief experiences of female mentorship, such as with Sharifa Salah el Dine, exist within exploitative structures. Firdaus recognizes the social forces shaping her life when she declares, "I am not a prostitute … they taught me to grow up as a prostitute" (El Saadawi, 1984). Unlike Kambili, Firdaus finds no supportive community;

her resistance peaks when she boldly asserts, “My body at least is mine” (El Saadawi, 1984) and murders Marzouk. This statement marks the first time she claims ownership over herself, rebuffing a lifetime of abuse by her father, uncle, husband, pimps, and clients. The act of killing Marzouk represents a final rejection of control, using her body to fight back and reclaim agency. Her final truth-telling to the narrator El Saadawi (1984) exposes a society that punishes women not for wrongdoing but for daring to seek freedom, turning her voice itself into an act of defiance.

Together, Kambili and Firdaus illustrate two very different forms of African feminist resistance. Kambili’s resistance grows slowly through care, relationships, and community, shaped by negotiation and relational empowerment. Firdaus’s resistance, by contrast, is radical and uncompromising, born from a life without support or protection. These stories show that women’s resistance is not uniform; it is shaped by context, culture, and power. Kambili’s voice develops gradually with guidance and community, while Firdaus’s emerges through pain, suffering, and silence. Both, however, reveal the strength of reclaiming the self, speaking truth, and surviving under oppression. This reflects nego-feminism. Firdaus’s resistance, however, comes from confrontation. She has no safe space or support. Her resistance is built on rejecting the forces that hurt her. Their stories show that African women do not resist in the same way. Resistance depends on place, community, and power. Kambili’s voice grows gently. Firdaus’s voice rises through pain. Yet, both show the importance of speaking, surviving, and reclaiming life.

Claiming the Self: Intersectional Empowerment in Purple Hibiscus and Woman at Point Zero:

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Kambili Achike’s journey toward selfhood unfolds not through open rebellion, but through gradual, relational change shaped by the intersecting forces of gender, religion, and domestic power. At home, Kambili exists within a space where Catholic extremism and patriarchal authority silence her voice. She reflects that she and her brother “spoke more with our spirits than with our lips” (Adichie, 2003), a line that captures how fear governs even their most basic forms of communication. Silence, for Kambili, is not simply shyness; it is a learned survival strategy in a household where obedience is enforced through emotional and physical violence. Eugene Achike’s authority is rooted in both patriarchy and colonial Christianity. He is described as “too much of a colonial product” Adichie (2003), a phrase that explains how his rigid religiosity rejects indigenous culture while demanding absolute submission from his family. This fusion of colonial values and religious absolutism creates an environment in which Kambili’s gender further limits her agency. She is expected to be quiet, devout, and perfect, internalizing the belief that love must be earned through suffering and discipline.

Kambili’s transformation begins only when she encounters an alternative model of living at Aunty Ifeoma’s home in Nsukka. There, authority is negotiated rather than imposed, and women speak freely, argue openly, and laugh without fear. This contrast allows Kambili to imagine a self beyond silence. The symbolic center of this awakening is the purple hibiscus itself, which Amaka describes as representing “a different kind of freedom … a freedom to be, to do” (Adichie, 2003). Unlike the rigid red hibiscus in Eugene’s compound, the purple flower represents growth that is experimental, fragile, and sustained by care rather than control.

Crucially, Kambili’s resistance does not involve rejecting family or faith outright. Instead, she learns to speak, question, and feel within relationships that affirm her humanity. By the end of the novel, her “lifting of the silence” Adichie (2003) signals a reclaimed voice grounded in connection rather than isolation. Through Kambili, Adichie (2003) presents empowerment as a slow, negotiated process—one made possible by community, alternative forms of spirituality, and emotional support. This model of resistance aligns closely with womanist thought, which values healing, relational strength, and survival within—and sometimes despite—oppressive structures.

In contrast to Kambili’s relational growth, Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero* embodies a form of resistance shaped by extreme isolation and intersecting systems of violence. From childhood onward, Firdaus is subjected to overlapping forms of oppression: gendered violence, economic exploitation, class marginalization, and religious ideologies that normalize abuse. When she is told that “men well versed in their religion … beat their wives” and that a woman’s duty is unquestioning obedience (El Saadawi, 1984), the novel exposes how patriarchy and religious authority work together to legitimize male control. Firdaus is not merely abused by individuals; she is trapped within institutions that continually reinforce her disposability.

Unlike Kambili, Firdaus has no protective community to which she can retreat. As a result, her awakening takes the form of rupture rather than negotiation. This becomes evident when she reflects on her life and declares, “I am not a prostitute… they taught me to grow up as a prostitute” (El Saadawi, 1984). Here, Firdaus demonstrates a sharp political consciousness, recognizing that her exploitation was not accidental but systematically produced by family, education, labor, and the state. Her statement reframes prostitution not as moral failure but as the logical outcome of a society that offers women survival only through submission.

Firdaus’s most powerful act of resistance lies in her reclamation of bodily autonomy. After a lifetime of being beaten, owned, and violated, she asserts, “My body at least is mine” (El Saadawi, 1984). This moment

is radical precisely because it defies every structure – patriarchal, religious, and legal – that has claimed authority over her body. Her refusal to appeal her death sentence further solidifies this defiance. By rejecting clemency, Firdaus refuses to perform repentance for a system she knows is unjust. She understands that what terrifies the authorities is not her crime, but her refusal to remain silent and ashamed.

Firdaus's resistance, then, is absolute rather than restorative. With no community to shield her, she claims agency through total rejection of the world that has harmed her. From a womanist perspective, her defiance is no less valid than Kambili's negotiated empowerment. Womanism acknowledges that when survival within community becomes impossible, self-definition—even at the cost of life itself—can be a powerful form of resistance. Firdaus's story thus stands as a stark reminder that empowerment takes different shapes depending on the conditions a woman is forced to endure.

Conclusion

This paper has examined African female fiction as a site of resistance against interlocking systems of oppression, including patriarchy, colonial influence, religious authority, and socio-economic marginalization. Through a comparative reading of Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), the study has shown how African and Black womanist frameworks – such as nego-feminism, African womanism, and negotiated empowerment – offer more context-sensitive approaches than universal feminist models that overlook African women's lived realities. Firdaus's story in *Woman at Point Zero* exposes the violent convergence of patriarchal, religious, and political power in Egyptian society. Denied protection, community, and the possibility of negotiation, Firdaus's resistance takes the form of radical defiance and uncompromising truth-telling. Her assertion of bodily autonomy and refusal to seek pardon represent a final act of self-definition within a system that has consistently stripped her of dignity. In contrast, *Purple Hibiscus* presents empowerment as a gradual, negotiated process shaped by relational support and cultural context. Kambili's awakening occurs through exposure to alternative values in Nsukka, where dialogue, emotional safety, and communal ethics replace fear and silence. Her resistance unfolds quietly, through the slow reclamation of voice, thought, and identity, reflecting womanist notions of survival and growth within community rather than through rupture.

Taken together, the two novels challenge the assumption that women's liberation must follow a single, aggressive trajectory. Firdaus's radical defiance and Kambili's negotiated awakening represent different but equally valid womanist responses to oppression, shaped by lived experience, cultural location, and available forms of support. In both narratives, the female body and voice function as contested sites of control and resistance, underscoring the intersectional nature of womanist selfhood. Ultimately, El Saadawi (1977) and Adichie (2003) affirm that freedom is not bestowed by institutions or authority figures but claimed through acts of self-definition rooted in cultural knowledge, moral agency, and resilience. African womanhood, as represented in these novels, emerges not as a passive condition but as a dynamic, transformative force capable of negotiating survival and asserting humanity within hostile structures.

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