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Weaponized Virtues and the Architecture of Captivity: An Islamic Feminist Reading of Subversion, Patriarchal Hermeneutics, and Female Agency in Djaïli Amadou Amal's *Munyal: Les Larmes de la Patience* and Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*

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Abstract

This paper presents a comparative analysis of Djaïli Amadou Amal's *Munyal: Les Larmes de la Patience* and Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* through the lens of Islamic feminism. Operating in distinct African geographies—the Muslim Fulani society of the Cameroonian Sahel and the urban Arab Muslim milieu of postcolonial Egypt—both novels expose how patriarchal structures weaponize religious vocabulary to enforce female subjugation. While Amal's text centers on *munyal* (patience) as an ideological tool used to normalize forced marriage and domestic abuse, Saadawi's Firdaus encounters a systemic corruption where religious piety justifies financial and physical exploitation. Using the theoretical frameworks of Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, this study argues that both novels do not critique Islam itself, but rather denounce patriarchal hermeneutics—the manipulation of sacred text and cultural Islamic identity to construct a matrix of female captivity. This paper illustrates how both texts chart a trajectory of subversion, where the reclamation of the female body and voice serves as a radical demand for the gender egalitarianism inherent in divine justice.

Keywords: Islamic Feminism; Patriarchal Hermeneutics; Weaponized Virtues; Female Agency; Djaïli Amadou Amal; Nawal El Saadawi; African Literature

Introduction

Literature has long functioned as a powerful site of resistance against oppressive structures, particularly within African and Arab feminist traditions where women writers employ narrative as a political and ideological tool to dismantle systems of domination. Stratton (1994) argues that African women's writing systematically challenges patriarchal representations and reclaims female subjectivity by interrogating the gendered power relations embedded in both society and literary discourse. Similarly, El Saadawi (1980) conceives writing as an act of defiance through which women directly confront the intersecting forces of patriarchy, religion, class, and state power that regulate female existence in Arab societies. Extending this perspective, Cooke (2001) demonstrates how Arab and Muslim women writers utilize literature to contest patriarchal monopolies over religious interpretation, thereby constructing alternative discourses of female agency and empowerment. Together, these scholars underscore the capacity of literary texts to disrupt dominant ideologies, recover silenced histories, and carve out spaces for transformative social critique.

Across the Global South, literary narratives have persistently interrogated the intersections of gender, religion, culture, and power, revealing how patriarchal institutions manipulate social and spiritual values to sustain women's subordination. Within Muslim societies, this interrogation frequently exposes the structural tension between the egalitarian ethical foundations of Islam and the patriarchal systems historically legitimized in its name. It is within this critical terrain that Amal's (2021) *Munyal: Les larmes de la patience* and Nawal El Saadawi's (1983) *Woman at Point Zero* emerge as significant feminist interventions.

Although separated by more than four decades, distinct geographical terrains, and different linguistic traditions—the Fulani Muslim society of northern Cameroon and the urban Arab Muslim milieu of postcolonial Egypt—both novels articulate a shared urgency to expose the systemic violence inflicted upon women under patriarchal regimes. Through narratives of forced marriage, sexual exploitation, domestic abuse, emotional trauma, and psychological captivity, Amal and El Saadawi reveal how cultural customs and patriarchal interpretations of faith are mobilized to normalize women's suffering while silencing their resistance. Barlas (2002) observes that patriarchal authority often derives its legitimacy not from divine revelation itself, but from male-centered interpretive traditions that project structures of domination onto sacred texts. Likewise, Mernissi (1987) demonstrates how religious discourse is frequently appropriated during moments of social and political anxiety to reinforce male control over women's bodies, mobility, and societal roles.

To parse these dynamics, this study examines both novels through the lens of Islamic feminism, a theoretical framework that distinguishes Islam's egalitarian ethical principles from the patriarchal hermeneutics historically imposed upon them. Islamic feminist scholars such as Wadud (1999), Barlas (2002), Mernissi (1987), and Badran (2009) argue that the Qur'an does not establish a divinely sanctioned hierarchy between men and women. Rather, they contend

that gender inequality emerges from androcentric interpretations that conflate localized cultural customs with universal religious doctrine, effectively transforming faith into an instrument of social control. Consequently, Islamic feminism seeks not to reject Islam, but to reclaim its emancipatory potential by challenging patriarchal readings of religious texts and advocating for gender justice from within an Islamic epistemological framework.

Viewed through this perspective, *Munyal* and *Woman at Point Zero* dramatize the consequences of patriarchal hermeneutics by illustrating how virtues traditionally associated with morality, piety, patience, obedience, and honour are weaponized into mechanisms of female subordination. In *Munyal*, the Fulfulde concept of *munyal* (patience and endurance) is reconfigured into a gendered injunction that compels women to tolerate forced marriage, polygamy, domestic violence, and emotional suffering in silence. In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus's life narrative exposes how interlocking patriarchal institutions such as the family, marriage, religion, and the state, collectively regulate female existence and commodify the female body. While the novels emerge from vastly different sociocultural contexts, both reveal how systems of domination are sustained through the deliberate intersection of cultural practice, religious authority, and gendered power dynamics. Yet, neither text remains confined to a narrative of victimization; instead, both foreground female agency and resistance. Through the voices of Ramla, Hindou, and Safira, Amal disrupts the culture of silence surrounding women's suffering to create a collective space of testimony and critique. Similarly, Firdaus's prison narrative transforms personal trauma into a sweeping political indictment, exposing the structural mechanics that perpetuate women's oppression. Stratton (1994) notes that women's writing frequently functions as a site where marginalized voices contest dominant ideologies and reclaim subjectivity. Accordingly, both novels portray women who actively negotiate, challenge, and subvert the patriarchal systems that seek to define and constrain their lives.

This article employs a comparative literary approach informed by Islamic feminist criticism to examine the representation of patriarchal control, religious and cultural discourse, female suffering, and resistance in *Munyal* and *Woman at Point Zero*. Through close textual analysis, it investigates how concepts such as patience, obedience, honour, and morality are transformed into instruments of social control, while simultaneously exploring the narrative strategies through which the protagonists reclaim agency and voice. By placing Amal's Sahelian Cameroon in dialogue with El Saadawi's Egypt, this study demonstrates that the struggle against patriarchal domination transcends geographical and historical boundaries while remaining deeply shaped by localized cultural realities. This article argues that both novels expose the weaponization of cultural and religious values in the service of patriarchal authority while simultaneously envisioning forms of resistance through which women reclaim dignity, autonomy, and interpretive authority over their own lives. In doing so, Amal and El Saadawi contribute significantly to broader African, Arab, and Islamic feminist dialogues regarding gender justice, liberation, and the transformative potential of women's storytelling.

The Weaponization of Religious Concepts: *Munyal* and Institutional Piety

Islamic feminist criticism does not view Islam itself as inherently oppressive; rather, it interrogates the patriarchal hermeneutics through which male institutions monopolize religious interpretation, manipulate sacred discourse, and conflate localized cultural practices with divine injunctions to sustain women's subordination (Ahmed, 1992; Cooke, 2001). Central to Islamic feminist scholarship; most notably advanced by foundational theorists like Wadud (1999) and Barlas (2002) is the argument that gender inequality in Muslim societies originates not from the ontological text of the Qur'an, but from historically male-dominated interpretive traditions that have appropriated religious authority to legitimize unequal power relations. Barlas (2002) contends that the Qur'an does not establish a divinely ordained hierarchy between men and women; instead, androcentric readings have retroactively projected male authority onto the sacred text, transforming culturally contingent, historical norms into seemingly unquestionable, universal religious truths. This critical framework exposes how institutionalized piety shifts the focus from spiritual ethics to strict social control, rendering women's compliance a measure of their religious devotion (Mernissi, 1991).

This hermeneutic critique is directly applicable to Amal's (2021) *Munyal: Les larmes de la Patience* and Nawal El Saadawi's (1983), *Woman at Point Zero*, both of which expose the ways patriarchal structures instrumentalize religious and moral concepts to regulate women's bodies and autonomies. Although situated within distinct socio-cultural contexts—the Fulani Muslim society of northern Cameroon and the mid-twentieth-century urban Egyptian milieu, the two novels reveal a homologous process through which spiritual values and religious obligations are reconfigured into mechanisms of female submission.

In *Munyal: Les larmes de la Patience*, Amal (2021) exposes a profound hermeneutic distortion of Islamic ethics by examining how the Fulfulde concept of *munyal*, traditionally signifying patience, endurance, and spiritual perseverance, is weaponized against women within a highly patriarchal Fulani Muslim society. Historically associated with a broader framework of moral resilience and spiritual steadfastness, *munyal* is systematically reduced to a gendered mandate requiring absolute, unilateral obedience from wives, regardless of the domestic subjugation they endure. The recursive invocation of the term throughout the novel functions as an ideological corrective that urges women to endure hardship silently, accept structural injustice without complaint, and defer their hopes of relief to an indefinite future. Within this framework, patience is transformed from a reciprocal spiritual ideal into the central axis governing women's existential realities and the indispensable prerequisite for marital success. Consequently, marriage is constructed as a sacrosanct institution in which the "ideal woman" is defined entirely by her capitulation to patriarchal expectations. As Amal succinctly states through her narrator, *"Une femme naît avant tout épouse et mère"* (Amal, 2021, p. 99), [A woman is born, above all, to be a wife and a mother"], emphasizing how female ontology is fundamentally reduced to the roles of marriage and reproductive labour.

The ideological indoctrination of young women into this theology of submission begins long before the marital transition. As Ramla and Hindou prepare to leave for their husbands' compounds, they receive a strict paternal valediction from their father:

> *Munyal, mes filles! Intégrez-le dans votre vie future. Inscrivez-le dans votre cœur, répétez-le dans votre esprit! Munyal! Telle est la seule valeur du mariage et de la vie. Telle est la vraie valeur de notre religion, de nos coutumes, du pulaaku. Munyal, car c'est dans les douleurs qu'on vous le conseille, alors vous ne devrez jamais l'oublier. Munyal, mes filles! Car la patience est une vertu* (Amal, 2021, pp. 14, 68).
>
> [Patience, my daughters! Integrate it into your future lives. Write it on your hearts, repeat it in your minds! Patience! Such is the only value of marriage and of life. Such is the true value of our religion, our customs, and the *pulaaku*. Patience, because it is in suffering that it is advised to you, and so you must never forget it. Patience, my daughters! For patience is a virtue.]

Through this paternal dictate, *munyal* ceases to function as an interior spiritual virtue and is instead converted into an external disciplinary mechanism designed to suppress female suffering in order to safeguard the stability of the patriarchal family. Marriage is represented not as egalitarian companionship, but as an institutionalized form of servitude where silence is elevated to a moral and religious obligation. By mapping *munyal* directly onto *pulaaku* (the traditional Fulani code for values) and Islamic piety, the text demonstrates how women are socialized into accepting suffering as an essential component of both ethnic identity and divinely ordained womanhood. Consequently, the expansive Qur'anic concept of *ṣabr* (steadfastness) is systematically stripped of its universal, gender-neutral application and re-engineered into a highly gender-specific command directed exclusively at the containment of women.

This patriarchal manipulation becomes explicitly theological when the young women attempt to resist their forced marriages. Their father, Alhadji Boubakari, strategically invokes divine authority to neutralize their dissent: *"Munyal, mes filles! Car la patience est une vertu. Dieu aime les personnes patientes"* (Amal, 2021, p. 15; [Patience, my daughters! For patience is a virtue. God loves those who are patient]). This invocation of the divine transforms structural resistance into a form of cosmic impiety, thereby transmuting physical and emotional suffering into a sacred duty. Alhadji Boubakari further legitimizes this coercion by framing early marriage as an unyielding divine obligation and female virginity as a strict paternal religious responsibility. According to the prevailing patriarchal dogmatism, an unmarried daughter's perceived moral vulnerability directly jeopardizes her father's salvation in the afterlife. In this manner, localized cultural anxieties surrounding female sexuality and family honour (*gaddama*) are elevated to the immutable status of divine law.

This rhetoric of domestic servitude and secrecy is further reinforced by Uncle Hayatou, who couches total submission in the language of traditional, protective wisdom:

> *Munyal, mes filles! Soyez soumises à vos époux. Soyez pour lui une esclave et il vous sera captif. Soyez pour lui la terre et il sera votre ciel. Que jamais vos parents ne sachent ce qui est désagréable dans votre foyer; préservez-en l'image et préservez la vôtre; gardez secrets vos conflits conjugaux; ne cultivez pas l'aversion entre vos deux familles"* (Amal, 2021, p. 16).
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> [Patience, my daughters! Be submissive to your husbands. Be his slave and he will be your captive. Be the earth beneath him and he will be your sky. Never let your parents know what is unpleasant in your home; preserve its image and preserve yours; keep your marital conflicts secret; do not cultivate hostility between your two families.]

The explicit lexicon of slavery, absolute silence, and domestic concealment reveals that patriarchal authority is primarily concerned with protecting systemic male privilege rather than ensuring female well-being. Women are instructed not merely to endure violence, but to actively obscure it from public view, thereby preserving the outward social legitimacy of oppressive marital arrangements.

The devastating, corporeal consequences of this ideology are viscerally embodied in Hindou's forced marriage to Moubarak, a man notorious within the community as violent, irresponsible, and predatory. Despite his community-wide reputation as an alcoholic and drug addict (Amal, 2021, pp. 51, 57, 70,75), he remains a socially acceptable suitor because Hindou has been successfully socialized into compliance. As the narrator notes: *"Hindou était en âge de se marier et dans la famille, on admirait son caractère tranquille et soumis"* (Amal, 2021, p. 57; ["Hindou was of marriageable age, and within the family her calm and submissive character was greatly admired"]. Here, behavioural compliance is explicitly valued above a woman's physical safety, psychological autonomy, and inherent human dignity. Following the marriage, Hindou is subjected to systemic marital rape, physical abuse, and profound psychological humiliation. These violations are consistently legitimized through the deployment of corrupted religious rhetoric:

> *Ce n'est pas un crime! C'est un acte légitime! Le devoir conjugal. Ce n'est pas un péché. Bien au contraire; que ce soit pour moi ou pour Moubarak, c'est un bienfait accordé par Allah. Ce n'est pas un viol! C'est une preuve d'amour* (Amal, 2021, p. 95).
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> [It is not a crime! It is a legitimate act! A marital duty. It is not a sin. On the contrary, whether for me or for Moubarak, it is a blessing granted by Allah. It is not rape! It is proof of love.]

This denial of marital rape illustrates how patriarchal hermeneutics erase women's bodily autonomy by redefining systemic sexual violence as a marital "right" and coercion as a divine "blessing." Even when Moubarak flagrantly desecrates the domestic space by bringing another woman into their matrimonial bed, the family's response remains an unyielding refrain: *"Munyal! On ne peut aller contre la volonté de Dieu"* (Amal, 2021, p. 99; [Patience! We cannot

go against the will of God]). Rather than intervening to protect the victim, the community weaponizes endurance as a metaphysical obligation, trapping Hindou within a life-threatening marital matrix. This systematic normalization of violence directly reflects the theoretical insights of Mernissi (1991), who identifies entrenched patriarchy, rather than the foundational ethos of Islam, as the root cause of gender inequality in Muslim societies. Mernissi argues that male-dominated religious elites historically secured and maintained structural power by regulating women's bodies and mapping restrictions onto selective, androcentric interpretations of sacred texts. By connecting the core of Islamic tradition with feminist critiques, Mernissi demonstrates how male authorities institutionalized female subordination by presenting their own political and domestic privileges as divine decrees. The community's denial of Hindou's marital rape and their persistent demands for her *munyal* exemplify this exact process: her bodily autonomy is subordinated to male privilege, while her willingness to absorb trauma becomes the sole metric of her spiritual virtue. Consequently, within this setting, institutionalized religion functions less as a source of spiritual liberation than as an ideological apparatus through which patriarchal hegemony preserves its domestic hegemony.

Amal's narrative project thus aligns closely with the broader matrix of Islamic feminist scholarship, which seeks to reclaim the egalitarian principles embedded within the foundational texts. Wadud (1999) contends that traditional, classical interpretations of Islam frequently reflect the localized socio-cultural assumptions, anxieties, and biases of the historical male interpreters who recorded them, rather than the universal ethical equity of the Qur'anic message itself. Viewed through Wadud's hermeneutic lens, the relentless injunction of *munyal* in Amal's (2021) novel represents a cultural distortion of religious values specifically designed to sustain domestic containment. Furthermore, Ahmed (1992) posits that many contemporary practices presented as immutable religious duties are deeply intertwined with historical, pre-Islamic patriarchal structures that were later absorbed into religious discourses. Amal's depiction of forced marriage, enforced female silence, and the erasure of consent illustrates this precise convergence of localized custom and institutionalized faith. By consistently conflating *munyal* with religion, custom, and *pulaaku*, the male authority figures in the novel blur the boundary between divine ontology and human artifice. As a result, any attempt at female resistance is constructed as simultaneously a social deviance and a spiritual failure, demonstrating how patriarchal hermeneutics manipulate sacred values to render male dominance seemingly absolute and divinely sanctioned.

While Amal (2021) focuses on the intimate, domestic weaponization of virtue within a rural Fulani context, El Saadawi (1983) shifts the critique toward the institutionalized religious hypocrisy that pervades urban Egypt. Through the tragic trajectory of Firdaus, El Saadawi reveals how public displays of piety frequently coexist with; and actively shield private exploitation, exposing how formal religious authority becomes complicit in the economic, sexual, and psychological violence enacted against women. Firdaus first encounters this structural contradiction within the microcosm of her childhood home through her father, a man outwardly devoted to religious rituals yet profoundly abusive within the household:

> Every Friday morning, he would put on a clean galabeya and head for the mosque to attend the weekly prayer... For was it not verily true that stealing was a sin, and killing was a sin, and defaming the honour of a woman was a sin, and injustice was a sin, and beating another human being was a sin...? (El Saadawi, 1983, p. 10).

The irony is stark and deliberate. While her father publicly performs an adherence to a moral code that explicitly condemns injustice, he simultaneously perpetuates routine domestic terrorism. His treatment of his family further exposes the transactional, androcentric nature of his moral landscape: Firdaus recalls that when a daughter died, her father continued his routine undisturbed, but when a son died, he responded by beating her mother (El Saadawi, 1983, p. 16). Likewise, he routinely starved his children while prioritizing his own physical satiety. These early encounters force Firdaus to question the very architecture of paternal and spiritual authority, identifying it not as an ethical framework, but as a performance designed to legitimize absolute male narcissism.

This hypocrisy reaches its most sinister, systemic expression through Firdaus's uncle, an Al-Azhar scholar who directly embodies institutional Islamic authority. Although he acts as her theological pedagogue, teaching her the boundaries of religious devotion, he systematically violates her: "One day I fell sick with fever. My uncle sat on the bed by my side holding my head... Then his lips would touch my face and press down on my mouth, and his trembling fingers would feel their way slowly upwards over my thighs" (El Saadawi, 1983, p. 20). Firdaus is deeply destabilized by the cognitive dissonance of this trauma, precisely because this uncle had meticulously taught her that intimate physical contact outside the confines of marriage constituted a catastrophic sin. This rupture between doctrine and practice reveals the extent to which patriarchal authority grants itself exceptionalism from the puritanical standards it imposes on female subjects.

When the uncle subsequently orchestrates Firdaus's forced marriage to Sheikh Mahmoud, a decrepit widower, he does so under the moralizing pretence of benevolent protection: "My uncle, Sheikh Mahmoud, is a virtuous man... he can find in her an obedient wife, who will serve him and relieve his loneliness" (El Saadawi, 1983, p. 37). However, the behind-the-scenes negotiations surrounding the union lay bare its raw economic underpinnings. Her guardians discuss the dowry strictly as a commercial transaction designed to liquidate their own debts and improve their material standing. Marriage is thus demystified as a form of sanctified commodification, wherein the female body is traded as liquid capital to secure male economic survival.

Predictably, Firdaus's marital life immediately descends into physical subjugation. Reflecting on the grotesque disparity of the match, she notes: "He was already over sixty, whereas I had not yet turned nineteen" (El Saadawi, 1983, pp. 44–45). The marital home reproduces the identical power imbalances of her childhood, culminating in Sheikh Mahmoud beating her "whether he had a reason for it or not" (El Saadawi, 1983, p. 42). When Firdaus

attempts to subvert this abuse by fleeing back to her uncle's house, the institutional religious apparatus steps in to protect the male abuser rather than the vulnerable refugee:

> My uncle told me that all husbands beat their wives... It was precisely men well versed in their religion who beat their wives. The precepts of religion permitted such punishment. A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience (El Saadawi, 1983, pp. 46–47).

Here, patriarchal hermeneutics achieve their most explicit, institutionalized instantiation. Scriptural justifications (specifically, distorted applications of *Surah An-Nisa, 4:34*) are selectively deployed to legitimize corporal violence, while suffering is reframed as the ultimate crucible of female virtue. Istifadah & Rohmana (2022, p. 32) observe that the systemic oppression in *Woman at Point Zero* thrives on structural arrangements that essentialize women as ontologically inferior, despite the egalitarian spirit of foundational Islamic teachings.

El Saadawi's critique converges powerfully with the theoretical frameworks of Barlas (2002) and Wadud (1999). Firdaus's uncle, as an elite religious scholar, embodies the exact interpretive manipulation that Barlas criticizes: the selective hyper-fixation on textual fragments that appear to codify female submission, coupled with a wholesale erasure of the overarching Qur'anic commitments to cosmic justice, human dignity, and mutual spousal responsibility. This dynamic validates Wadud's (1999) assertion that patriarchal societies consistently conflate contingent male self-interest with immutable divine will. Firdaus's father and uncle both seamlessly inhabit overlapping networks of domestic and institutional power. The father's public devotion at the mosque functions as a form of social currency that grants him domestic impunity, illustrating Ahmed's (1992) landmark thesis that the historical degradation of women's status in Muslim societies is a product of political and social structures of patriarchy operating independently of genuine spiritual ethics.

Amal (2021) and El Saadawi (1983) collectively demonstrate that patriarchy sustains its hegemony not merely through raw physical coercion, but through the sophisticated manipulation of spiritual semantics and theological authority. Their literary projects validate the foundational contentions of Islamic feminism by carving out a clear distinction between Islam as an ethical faith grounded in equity and the historical, androcentric hermeneutics used to police women's lives. While Amal (2021) charts how the private virtue of *munyal* is warped into a psychological panopticon that silences resistance within the domestic compound, El Saadawi (1983) exposes how institutionalized piety and scholarly authority form a corrupt alliance with capitalist exploitation in the public square. In both texts, profound religious concepts are hollowed out, stripped of their transcendent ethical dimensions, and redeployed as disciplinary technologies of social control. Together, these authors provide a devastating critique of the ways patriarchal societies weaponize the vocabulary of the sacred to govern women's bodies, mute their voices, and erase their autonomy, all while claiming the indisputable sanction of divine law.

The Geography of Captivity: The Horizontal Panopticon of the Concession and the Vertical Street

The spatial architectures of both novels manifest the claustrophobia of patriarchal containment, transforming stone and pavement into physical extensions of dogma. To illustrate how androcentric ideologies are translated into concrete, material realities, Amal (2021) constructs a geography of captivity in which physical space operates as a primary apparatus of social discipline. In *Munyal: Les larmes de la Patience*, this captivity is horizontal, communal, and domestic, functioning entirely within the fortified perimeter of the Fulani compound, or concession. The compound operates not merely as a neutral domestic shelter, but as a gendered panopticon that meticulously regulates women's movements, colonizes their relationships, and erases their selfhood. Through its distinct architectural thresholds and fractured social hierarchies, the concession isolates women from extra-communal networks of solidarity while simultaneously subjecting them to an internal system of lateral surveillance and forced competition.

This domestic compound serves as the primary cartography of female confinement, wherein women are structurally segregated into specialized zones of subjugation under the constant jurisdiction of husbands, patriarchs, and senior kin. Ramla delineates her father's domain as a vast polygamous estate governed through unyielding, authoritarian control: "Nous sommes une famille nombreuse. Mon père le tient d'une main de fer. Quatre épouses lui ont donné une trentaine d'enfants dont les aînés, en majorité des filles, sont mariés" (Amal, 2021, p. 25). ["We are a large family. My father rules it with an iron hand. Four wives have given him around thirty children, most of the eldest being daughters who are already married."] The metaphor of the "main de fer" (iron hand) captures the absolute verticality of the household, where conversational dialogue is supplanted by the iron dictates of submission. Patriarchal dominion is not merely an abstract symbolic code; it physically partitions everyday life, situating the patriarch at the absolute zenith of the domestic hierarchy while wives and daughters occupy precarious, subordinate positions.

This asymmetric power dynamic is indelibly etched into the physical architecture of the concession itself, where stone walling mirrors ideological barriers:

> *Notre concession est entourée d'une enceinte de très hauts murs qui empêchent de voir l'intérieur. Les visiteurs n'y pénètrent pas; ils sont reçus à l'entrée dans un vestibule que, dans la tradition de l'hospitalité peule, nous nommons le zawleru. Après l'immense cour, où se dressent le hangar de mon père et son imposante villa, l'on pénètre à l'arrière-cour de la concession où se détachent les quatre appartements des épouses ainsi que leurs cuisines* (Amal, 2021, pp. 25–26).
>
> [Our compound is surrounded by very high walls that prevent anyone from seeing inside. Visitors do not enter; they are received at the entrance in a vestibule which, according to Fulani hospitality tradition, we call the *zawleru*.

> Beyond the vast courtyard, where my father's shelter and imposing villa stand, one reaches the back of the compound where the four apartments of the wives and their kitchens are located.]

The high external walls perform a dual carceral function. Physically, they sever women from the public square, cutting off access to alternative socio-legal institutions or autonomous economic markets. Symbolically, they establish an insulated patriarchal universe wherein male sovereignty is absolute. The architecture creates a gendered spatial division: the public-facing *zawleru* represents the site of male hospitality and external diplomacy, whereas the hidden *arrière-cour* (backyard) becomes the designated site of female containment and reproductive labour. The walls do not just keep the world out; they keep the women in, manufacturing a silence that the community mistakes for peace.

Within this enclosed matrix, polygamy is leveraged as an administrative strategy of patriarchal governance. Rather than fostering organic alliances among the subjugated women, the structural configuration of the compound deliberately incites factionalism and rivalry. Wives are structurally incentivized to perceive one another as existential adversaries competing for the finite emotional capital, financial security, and social recognition distributed arbitrarily by the patriarch. Ramla's mother, the senior wife, embodies this internal colonization: “Elle est la première épouse de mon père et lui est totalement soumise. Quand il lui arrive de prendre une nouvelle femme, elle lui souhaite hypocritement tout le bonheur du monde, priant que la nouvelle venue ne fasse pas long feu” (Amal, 2021, p. 27). [She is my father's first wife and is completely submissive to him. Whenever he takes a new wife, she hypocritically wishes her all the happiness in the world while secretly praying that the newcomer will not last long.] Though she occupies a nominally elevated status as the *daada-saare* (matriarch of the house), her survival strategy is predicated entirely on self-effacing compliance rather than genuine empowerment. As Ramla observes, her position is maintained exclusively through a performance of radical patience: "Si elle a su garder sa place, cela tient simplement à sa patience. Elle a l’heureuse faculté de tout accepter, de tout supporter et surtout, de tout oublier… ou de faire semblant!" (Amal, 2021, p. 27; [“If she has managed to keep her place, it is simply because of her patience. She possesses the remarkable ability to accept everything, endure everything, and above all, forget everything—or at least pretend to.”]. This underscores how *munyal* operates as a psychic mechanism through which the victims themselves are co-opted into reproducing patriarchal paradigms. The valorised wife is not one who possesses agency, but one who successfully represses her own grievances to maintain the structural veneer of domestic harmony. In this space, to endure is to survive, but to survive is to submit.

Consequently, the concession functions as an internalized, self-policing panopticon where women are compelled to become each other's wardens. Hindou’s mother, acutely aware of this lateral surveillance, defers critical intimate disclosures to her daughter until the household is sleeping:

> Elle attendait tard dans la nuit que la concession fût plongée dans le noir pour me réveiller doucement. Elle ne tenait pas à ce que notre conversation tombe

> dans les oreilles indiscrètes de ses coépouses, rivales acharnées, qui n'attendaient que l'occasion de repérer ses faiblesses (Amal, 2021, pp. 35–36).
>
> [She waited until late at night, until the compound was plunged into darkness, before gently waking me. She did not want our conversation to fall into the indiscreet ears of her co-wives, fierce rivals who were only waiting for an opportunity to discover her weaknesses.]

This climate of systemic suspicion fractures intergenerational female relationships, precluding the formation of a cohesive counter-hegemonic resistance. Co-wives are transformed into competitive wardens, and emotional vulnerability is weaponized as political liability. The darkness of the night becomes the only space for maternal tenderness, yet even that darkness is haunted by the phantom presence of listening ears.

This lateral warfare is tragically demonstrated through the relationship between Ramla and Safira. When the seventeen-year-old Ramla is introduced into the household as the forced co-wife to Alhadji Issa, Safira does not recognize her as a mutual casualty of patriarchal bartering; instead, she views the young bride as an immediate threat to her established domestic standing. Safira deploys a series of hostile domestic manoeuvres to humiliate Ramla, transforming everyday household objects into weapons of proxy warfare. Through Safira's calculated hostility, Amal (2021) illustrates how patriarchy effectively diverts female frustration away from its source—the ruling patriarch—and redirects it inward against other women. The compound becomes a claustrophobic chessboard where women bleed for marginal survival, while the patriarch sits as the unchallenged grandmaster of their division.

Amal (2021) reinforces this diagnostic critique through the chaotic foil of Uncle Moussa's compound, presenting a grotesque funhouse mirror of domesticity:

> La concession d'oncle Moussa est l'exemple même d'une polygamie chaotique. Depuis toujours, on y entend toutes sortes de scandales. Les coépouses, rivales acharnées, qui se battent à armes blanches, des filles répudiées et remariées, des accusations de maraboutage, de sorcellerie, de drogue, d'alcool… (Amal, 2021, p. 70).
>
> [Uncle Moussa's compound is the perfect example of chaotic polygamy. For as long as anyone can remember, all kinds of scandals have occurred there. Co-wives, fierce rivals, fight each other with knives; daughters are divorced and remarried; accusations of witchcraft, sorcery, drugs, and alcohol abound.]

Far from establishing an oasis of familial safety, this distorted domesticity breeds structural volatility. The home, traditionally romanticized as a sanctuary, is recast as a domestic slaughterhouse. The intense expenditure of female energy is squandered on lateral violence rather than being mobilized to dismantle the overarching patriarchal scaffolds that enclose them. This confinement is reinforced by ideological borders that extend far beyond the physical

masonry of the compound. Before their marital departures, Ramla and Hindou are explicitly informed of their absolute disenfranchisement:

> À partir de maintenant, vous appartenez chacune à votre époux et lui devez une soumission totale instaurée par Allah; sans sa permission, vous n'avez pas le droit de sortir, ni même celui d'accourir à mon chevet. Ainsi, et à cette seule condition, vous serez des épouses accomplies (Amal, 2021, p. 18).
>
> [From now on, each of you belongs to your husband and owes him total submission ordained by Allah. Without his permission, you do not have the right to leave the house, nor even to come to my bedside. Only under this condition will you become accomplished wives.]

The lexicon of absolute ownership is unambiguous: marriage marks the ontological death of the woman as an autonomous subject, converting her into a localized commodity whose mobility and identity are completely subsumed under male custody. The physical prison of the concession is merely the material manifestation of a larger, systemic Sahelian social order where female aspirations are completely bounded by the overlapping forces of culture, *pulaaku*, and corrupted theological interpretations. The architecture of stone merely mimics the architecture of the mind.

Firdaus's captivity is not born within the closed stone structures of urbanity; rather, it is initiated upon her very flesh within the deceptive openness of the rural landscape. In El Saadawi's (1983) universe, bodily autonomy is colonized by patriarchal authority long before architectural confinement can take root. One of the earliest, most violent manifestations of this structural regulation is female genital mutilation (FGM), a traumatic somatic intervention that marks society's determination to excise female desire from childhood. Recalling this violation, Firdaus narrates: "Then she brought a woman who was carrying a small knife or maybe a razor blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from between my thighs. I cried all night (El Saadawi, 1983, p. 12). The blade does not merely sever tissue; it carves the patriarchal law directly onto Firdaus's anatomy, transforming her body into the primary site of her incarceration. Significantly, before this mutilation, the agrarian fields offer one of the few spaces where she tastes unmonitored freedom, playing with Mohammadain among the crops and discovering an organic pleasure insulated from adult surveillance. The razor blade abruptly shears away this ephemeral Eden, signalling a violent ontological transition where the vastness of the fields collapses into the interior prison of gendered social control.

This somatic discipline is reinforced by the absolute verticality of her father's domestic rule. Though publicly esteemed for his performance of religious piety, he operates at home as a despotic sovereign who rules through terror: *"Whenever my mother said something to him, he would beat her"* (El Saadawi, 1983, p. 18). Firdaus observes how this systemic violence is calibrated according to an explicit hierarchy of gendered worth:

> When one of the female children died, my father would eat his supper, my mother would wash his legs, and then he would go to sleep. But when the child

> that died was a boy, he would beat my mother, then have his supper and lie down to sleep (El Saadawi, 1983, p. 18).

In this domestic economy, a daughter's death passes with the frictionless rhythm of an unbothered meal, while a son's death is registered through the physical flagellation of the mother. The father's appetite remains undisturbed by grief, yet it is consistently lubricated by violence. Through these visceral childhood exposures, Firdaus learns that within the patriarchal calculus, her existence is an invisible liability, and her identity is pre-assigned to subordination.

Following the death of her parents, Firdaus's relocation to her uncle's house in Cairo merely exchanges a crude, rural despotism for a refined, bourgeois captivity. Although her uncle is educated and associated with the intellectual prestige of Al-Azhar scholarship, this institutional environment offers no genuine liberation; instead, it erects a more sophisticated hierarchy. Firdaus's intellectual ambitions and her dreams of professional self-determination are bartered away when her uncle and his wife orchestrate her forced marriage to Sheikh Mahmoud. This choice exposes the absolute socio-spatial imaginary of the patriarchal order, which views marriage as the only legitimate destination for the female subject, converting her academic success into a mere ornament for male consumption.

The marital home of Sheikh Mahmoud introduces a new, distinct geography of confinement. Unlike the horizontal, communal surveillance of Amal's Fulani concession, Firdaus's imprisonment is privatized, atomized, and compressed within the walls of an urban apartment. Her domestic sphere is not a shared courtyard of lateral friction, but a claustrophobic vacuum governed by her husband's obsessive, panoptic gaze: "He never went out of the house. All day long he remained by my side in the house, or in the kitchen, watching me as I cooked or washed" (El Saadawi, 1983, p. 42). This relentless surveillance transforms domestic labour into a carceral performance, stripping Firdaus of privacy and psychological interiority. When this psychological siege inevitably escalates into physical battery: *"On one occasion he hit me all over with his shoe. My face and body became swollen and bruised"* (p. 46). Firdaus attempts to break the leash by seeking sanctuary back at her uncle's house. However, her subversion is instantly crushed by the alliance of clerical and marital authority:

> My uncle told me that all husbands beat their wives... It was precisely men well versed in their religion who beat their wives. The precepts of religion permitted such punishment. A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience (El Saadawi, 1983, pp. 46–47).

This is the ideological crux of the novel: the scriptural apparatus is explicitly mobilized to institutionalize domestic trauma, transforming a bruised body into a testament of female virtue. Her uncle's theological jurisprudence strips her of any legal or moral recourse, ensuring that her escape from one cage merely drops her back into another.

Driven to existential desperation, Firdaus flees to the literal streets of Cairo, yet El Saadawi (1983) quickly shatters the illusion of public space as a site of liberation. The street is merely an open-air extension of the domestic prison, characterized by identical modes of

predatory exploitation. Her encounter with Bayoumi, who initially performs the role of a benevolent saviour, reproduces the exact cyclic trap of her marriage: “He took to locking me in the flat before going out. He would come back in the middle of the night, pull the cover away from me, slap my face, and then bear down on me with all his weight” (El Saadawi, 1983, p. 48). The apartment door is locked from the outside, the bed remains a site of physical occupation, and Bayoumi’s chivalry dissolves into the familiar gravity of male entitlement.

Finding every avenue of formal employment obstructed by a state bureaucracy controlled entirely by male gatekeepers, Firdaus enters sex work, choosing the commodification of her own body as a radical strategy to achieve financial autonomy. For a brief period, she subverts the system by commanding her own prices, exploiting the market to purchase an independent spatial domain. Yet, this mobility remains bounded by the overarching structures of patriarchal capitalism. Reflecting on the static reality of her sex work, Firdaus delivers a devastating indictment of her spatial confinement: “I never used to leave the house. In fact, I never even left the bedroom. Day and night I lay on the bed, crucified, and every hour a man would come in” (El Saadawi, 1983, p. 56). The religious metaphor of crucifixion is highly deliberate: her bed is transformed from an intimate domestic furniture into an altar of systemic sacrifice, where her body is continuously consumed by an endless queue of patriarchal patrons. This realization leads Firdaus to her most revolutionary diagnostic insight: the structural distinction between respectable bourgeois marriage and commercial sex work is entirely illusory. In both institutions, women are forced to trade their physical bodies for material survival within parameters drawn exclusively by men. The only difference, Firdaus suggests, is that the prostitute openly itemizes her invoice, whereas the wife provides identical services under the ideological camouflage of respectability and divine law. This vertical maze of exploitation reaches its logical conclusion in Marzouk, the pimp who attempts to unionize and control her earnings. Marzouk represents the ultimate synthesis of state, economic, and patriarchal power, a macro-manifestation of the same dominion once exercised by her father and uncle. Every attempt by Firdaus to scale the socio-economic ladder is met by a higher tier of male custody; the vertical hierarchy remains unyielding.

The final stage of Firdaus's spatial itinerary is the prison cell of Qanatir, where she awaits state execution for the murder of Marzouk. In a profound stroke of literary irony, this absolute physical confinement becomes the only space in the entire novel where Firdaus experiences radical psychological liberation. By striking down the pimp and refusing to beg for a presidential pardon, she effectively severs the leash of the patriarchal order. The prison cell no longer demands her obedience because she has already rejected the currency of survival that the system uses to bargain for her submission. Within these final walls, the carceral space is transfigured into a site of absolute resistance where she reclaims absolute ownership of her voice, her identity, and her death.

When placed in conversation, *Munyal* and *Woman at Point Zero* demonstrate that patriarchy does not preserve its power solely through physical force; rather, it thrives by translating its ideologies into oppressive spatial arrangements and linguistic structures. Both novels vividly

map the terrain of female subjugation, highlighting a critical divergence in their spatial execution: In Amal's (2021) Sahelian context, captivity is horizontal, communal, and domestic. It is concentrated within the high walls of the *concession*, utilizing the cultural weight of *munyal* and the internal friction of polygamy to transform women into their own wardens within a self-policing compound. While in El Saadawi's (1983) Egyptian landscape, captivity is vertical, institutional, and mobile. It extends from the village hut to the urban apartment, across corporate offices, through the commercialized bedroom, and into the state prison cell. It reveals a society where patriarchy has thoroughly saturated every public, financial, and religious institution. Both authors achieve a profound convergence with the core tenets of Islamic feminist critiques. By dramatizing the systematic manipulation of terms like *ṣabr* (patience) and marital duty, Amal and El Saadawi strip away the pious rhetoric used by male authorities to justify structural violence. Their narratives demonstrate that the oppression of women is not an authentic reflection of foundational Islamic ethics, but rather a deliberate product of historical patriarchal systems that weaponize space, custom, and the vocabulary of the sacred to turn women's bodies into sites of absolute regulation and exchange.

Polyphonic Rebellion and Existential Rupture: The Subversion of Patriarchal Legitimacy

Despite the crushing weight of systemic containment in both *Munyal: Les larmes de la Patience* and *Woman at Point Zero*, the narratives culminate in profound acts of subversion that resonate with Islamic feminist demands for ontological liberation, structural agency, and gender justice. Rather than rendering women as passive casualties of an immutable fate, Amal (2021) and Saadawi (1983) construct female protagonists who progressively transition from enforced silence to radical, non-negotiable modes of refusal. These refusals do not constitute a rejection of Islam as a spiritual faith; instead, they mount a direct, insurgent challenge against the patriarchal hermeneutics that falsely claim divine legitimacy for domestic and state violence. By stripping male authority of its sacred camouflage, both texts reclaim the core ethical foundations of Islam, demonstrating that resistance against human tyranny is an act of spiritual and moral integrity rather than transgression.

In *Munyal*, this subversion is structurally and thematic initiated through the disruption of narrative monopoly. Amal deploys a polyphonic narrative structure that splits the text among three distinct consciousnesses: Ramla, Hindou, and Safira. This formal orchestration serves as an immediate act of literary resistance; by granting each woman an autonomous narrative voice, the novel breaks the collective silence traditionally imposed on the Sahelian female subject and systematically refuses the erasure of their subjectivity. The primary axis of resistance in the novel is what may be theorized as a radical "impatience"—the conscious, epistemic refusal to absorb trauma under the moralizing guise of *munyal*. Far from representing a genuine spiritual virtue, patience is exposed as an artificial strategy of domestic containment. The protagonists' psychological evolution marks a critical breakdown of this discourse. Hindou's psychic fracturing, precipitated by unyielding abuse, becomes the catalyst for an epistemic rupture:

> Munyal, munyal, munyal... Munyal. C'en était trop pour Hindou. Elle ne voulait plus de ce fameux munyal. Non, elle ne voulait plus endurer, ni patienter, ni supporter, elle n'en avait plus la force ni le courage et encore moins l'envie... un mot magique censé réconforter. Supporter jusqu'à la limite du supportable, voire au-delà du supportable. Boire la coupe jusqu'à la lie. On ne peut aller contre la volonté de Dieu. Tout ce qui nous arrive est de son fait, s'il nous impose une épreuve, c'est afin de tester notre endurance, d'éprouver notre persévérance et notre capacité à nous maîtriser (Amal, 2021, pp. 8–9).
>
> [Patience, patience, patience... Patience. It was too much for Hindou. She no longer wanted this so-called patience. No, she no longer wanted to endure, nor to wait, nor to bear it; she no longer had the strength, courage, or even the desire... a magic word meant to comfort. To endure to the limit of the endurable, even beyond the endurable. To drink the cup to the dregs. "We cannot go against the will of God. Everything that happens to us is His doing; if He imposes an ordeal upon us, it is to test our endurance, to try our perseverance and our capacity for self-mastery."]

This internal monologue represents far more than emotional exhaustion; it is a profound act of epistemic resistance. Hindou explicitly unpacks the linguistic conditioning that has naturalized her torment, systematically dismantling the theological fiction that transforms domestic abuse into a divine test of perseverance. Her rejection of *munyal* reclaims her primary right to demarcate the boundaries of her own physical and psychological endurance. Even though her physical flight from her husband's home to Gazawa is intercepted, resulting in a forced return and a catastrophic mental breakdown, her psychological withdrawal serves as a radical refusal to participate in her own subjugation. Her madness becomes a tragic, non-compliant space that patriarchal authority can neither domesticate nor cure.

Ramla's intellectual aspirations and Safira's tactical domestic manoeuvres further reinforce this polyphonic rebellion. Each woman embodies a distinct, localized mode of defiance: Ramla through intellectual refusal, Hindou through somatic and psychological withdrawal, and Safira through strategic counter-machinations within the domestic architecture. By multiplying these voices, Amal ensures that the text performs the exact liberation it advocates: the collective reclamation of the female voice as the foundational step toward dismantling the monologic, single-authored authority of patriarchal storytelling.

In sharp contrast to Amal's (2021) communal and dialogic framework, El Saadawi (1983) constructs a solitary, fiercely existential form of subversion in the character of Firdaus. Her rebellion operates not through gradual, domestic negotiation, but through a catastrophic, definitive rupture: the homicide of her pimp, Marzouk, and her subsequent refusal to petition the state for judicial clemency. This act represents the symbolic and physical execution of illegitimate authority—the violent dismantling of a false male sovereignty that attempts to supplant divine equity with predatory capitalistic control. Firdaus's trajectory demonstrates that every attempt to negotiate autonomy within the established socioeconomic coordinates of

patriarchy is inevitably reabsorbed into modern networks of exploitation. Whether navigating the terms of respectability in marriage, corporate employment, or high-class prostitution, she encounters an identical male gatekeeping mechanism that converts authority into gendered violence. Even when she achieves brief financial dominance as an independent escort, she exposes the structural limits of this capitalist autonomy: I knew that my profession had been invented by men, and that men were in control of both our world, the one on earth, and the one in heaven (El Saadawi, 1983, p. 94). This profound realization prompts her final, violent transgression against Marzouk. The act of killing her pimp is framed not as an outburst of chaotic aggression, but as a deliberate, rational termination of her status as an exchangeable object: "I raised the knife and buried it deep in his neck… I was astonished to find how easily my hand moved as I thrust the knife into his flesh" (El Saadawi, 1983, p. 95). Paradoxically, this ultimate somatic violation becomes her moment of supreme self-recognition. By driving the blade into the flesh of her oppressor, Firdaus ruptures her status as a commodity, reclaiming her body through the destruction of the man who claimed ownership over it. Her subversion is intensified and finalized through her absolute refusal to accept a presidential pardon. By rejecting the institutional mercy of the state, Firdaus rejects the very legitimacy of the legal and political apparatus that both generated and punished her structural suffering. Her serene acceptance of the gallows becomes the ultimate assertion of absolute sovereignty over her own existence. From this perspective, Firdaus's trajectory embodies what Mernissi (1991) identifies as the threat to patriarchal order: an explicit refusal to recognize the legitimacy of its power or the currency of its mercy. She completely bypasses male mediation, establishing a direct, unmediated relation between her own consciousness and ultimate cosmic justice.

While Amal (2021) and El Saadawi (1983) deploy divergent narrative and spatial strategies, their texts converge powerfully upon a shared Islamic feminist epistemology: genuine liberation begins with the radical deconstruction of patriarchal authority disguised as moral, cultural, or religious law. In *Munyal*, subversion is collective, linguistic, and narrative, accomplished through the shattering of domestic silence and the multiplication of female subjectivities. In *Woman at Point Zero*, subversion is singular, existential, and somatic, culminating in the complete rejection of life itself under compromised patriarchal terms. Yet, both texts illuminate a vital critical insight: these protagonists are not rebelling against the sacred essence of their faith; rather, they are rebelling against the androcentric distortions that have weaponized the sacred to govern women's lives. Their resistance represents not apostasy, but an ethical awakening—a reclamation of human dignity that exposes patriarchal tyranny as the ultimate form of spiritual failure.

Conclusion: Toward a Hermeneutics of Liberation

The subversive trajectories charted in *Munyal: Les larmes de la Patience* and *Woman at Point Zero* reveal that patriarchal hegemonies depend fundamentally on a psychological and spatial architecture: the internalization of silence as virtue and the enforcement of space as captivity. Amal (2021) systematically dismantles this structure through a polyphonic orchestration that restores narrative sovereignty to the fractured Sahelian female subject,

transforming the private domestic compound into a site of collective epistemic rupture. Conversely, El Saadawi (1983) exposes the fragility of state and clerical control through Firdaus's catastrophic, existential refusal to negotiate her humanity within the predatory coordinates of urban capitalism and institutional piety. By transmuting systemic suffering into unyielding testimony, and that testimony into active resistance, both authors map a profound convergence with the core tenets of Islamic feminist scholarship. They vividly demonstrate that the subversion of androcentric authority is not an act of secular apostasy, but rather an ethical awakening that aligns with the foundational, egalitarian spirit of the faith. In doing so, Amal and El Saadawi strip the patriarchal apparatus of its pseudo-theological immunity, exposing it not as an immutable divine necessity, but as a historically contingent, spatial-carceral system that can—and must—be decisively dismantled.

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