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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Rebel Feminists: A Comparative Analysis of Patriarchy and Resistance in *A Daughter of Isis* and *Dreams of Trespass***

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**ABSTRACT**

This article examines the portrayal of patriarchal systems and forms of resistance within Nawal Saadawi's *A Daughter of Isis: The Early Life of Nawal El Saadawi* and Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*. That is, the study navigates through the narratives, characters, and socio-cultural contexts that are depicted in both literary works while using an analytical approach. It starts with examining the influence of patriarchal structures on women's lives, identities, and agency. By doing so, the article explores the forms and shapes of patriarchy that result in creating gender inequality. Moreover, the research sheds light on the various acts of resistance that are adopted by several characters to challenge and fight patriarchal constraints. In other words, this article explores the extent to which a multiplicity of characters fight against the oppressive system of patriarchy through various acts and behaviours. This means that the study sheds light on the enduring struggle for women's rights and liberation in Arab societies. By examining two literary works from two different countries, the present study examines the similarities and differences between them to evaluate the extent to which Arab women are considered a homogenous group that experiences the same forms of oppression.

**KEYWORDS**

Gender, patriarchy, resistance, feminism, *A Daughter of Isis: The Early Life of Nawal El Saadawi*, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*.

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**1. Introduction**

For ages, the exploration of cultural constructs and power dynamics often serves as a mirror that reflects the reality of societies. Among these constructs, patriarchy stands as a force that has shaped social relations, identities, and narratives for centuries. Through the lens of literature, authors have delved deep into the manifestations of patriarchy by unveiling its shapes and forms. Indeed, patriarchal structures have long governed the lives of women. That is, they control their roles, rights, and freedoms in the whole world, generally, and Arab communities specifically. Yet, within the confines of patriarchy, there exists a spirit of resistance against oppressive norms and a constant pursuit of liberation. The influence of patriarchal systems and the multiple forms of resistance have long been subjects of scholarly inquiry and literary exploration. In the literary works of Nawal Saadawi's *A Daughter of Isis* and Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass*, these themes are depicted and offer a profound look into the experiences of women who are governed by patriarchal societies. Through their autobiographies, this study aims to explore the multiple forms of patriarchy and resistance therein. By delving into the multifaceted dimensions of gender inequality, cultural expectations, and power structures, this article aims to investigate the ways in which women face and challenge patriarchal constraints. Lastly, this article targets comparing the forms of patriarchy within the two novels, with the aim of unveiling the extent to which Arab women share the same experiences and live under the same conditions.

The significance of the study lies in contributing to literary criticism by providing an in-depth and detailed analysis of how Arab novelists portray patriarchy and resistance. Furthermore, this analysis provides valuable insights into the field of gender studies since highlighting the struggles and resistance of women in literature fosters not only a clear understanding of gender oppression but also inspires social change by supporting women's rights.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 From Theory to Text: Understanding Feminism and its Literary Critique**

Feminism, a multifaceted and evolving movement, has played a pivotal role in reshaping social norms and advocating for gender equality. In this section, this article delves into an overview of feminism by exploring its types, historical roots, and waves.

Feminism, by its essence, is "an active desire to change women's position in society. [...] Feminism is par excellence a social movement for change in the position of women." (Delmar, 2001, 13) In other words, feminism is a range of ideologies and political and social movements that share a common goal: to achieve political, social, and economic rights as well as educational and professional opportunities for women that are equal to men. While feminism has a universal definition, it is categorized into various types. First, liberal feminism campaigns for equality between men and women by calling for equal rights and opportunities. Moreover, Marxist feminism associates gender inequality in general and women's victimization in specific to capitalism and the division of labor. Moreover, Radical feminism, which emerged in the 1970s, attributes all women's oppression to men and advocates for their exclusion from women's lives. Besides, Black feminism adds racism alongside patriarchy and capitalism as being the causes behind putting black women at the bottom of the hierarchy, where they are considered secondary human beings in terms of enjoying rights and freedom due to being treated as slaves. (Motta et al., 2001) To sum up, this paragraph highlights various types of feminism. Each one has different perspectives yet united in their shared objective of campaigning for women's rights.

As classified into various branches, feminism includes multiple waves. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the first wave of feminism emerged and was marked by women's advocacy for equal fundamental rights, particularly the right to vote. Many feminists like John Stuart Mill defended gender equality. Mill argued for universal suffrage by believing that every individual should possess the right to vote to defend their own rights and actively engage in decision-making processes. That is to say; Mill observed that the exclusion of half of humanity from active participation in society beyond domestic roles hindered overall human progress and development. (Mill, 1869) To sum up, the first wave of feminism believes that voting rights should extend beyond men to include women, as there is no rationale behind their exclusion from the electoral process.

The second wave of feminism, which took place from the 1960s to the 1980s, extended beyond the pursuit of basic equal rights to advocate for legal and social equality for women. That is, this wave criticizes the relegation of women to the role of housewives and calls for integrating them into society as active citizens. One of the prominent feminists of this wave is Maria Mies, who argues that society confines women to the private sphere by considering it as their natural and appropriate place. Within this space, women are imprisoned and deprived of a variety, if not all, rights, as well as considered as hidden workers who do not possess a paid job. (Mies, 1986) This wave of feminism has expanded its focus beyond the socio-political and economic status of women to address their representation in various fields like media and literature. Such representation plays a crucial role in reinforcing social norms concerning acceptable forms of femininity and masculinity, thus contributing to the socialization process. The emergence of a new feminist trend in literary analysis, known as feminist literary criticism, celebrates the examination of how women are portrayed in texts. By definition, it is "the rebellion of the female consciousness against the male images of female identity and experience." (Goel, 2010, 403) Feminist literary criticism involves examining how women are depicted in texts through a feminist lens. In this approach, feminists assess the portrayal of women to determine the degree of misrepresentation, powerlessness, and marginalization that are presented in specific texts.

The third wave of feminism, which emerged in the 1990s, is often seen as an extension of the second wave. Unlike the previous waves, which primarily defined women by their gender, the third wave seeks to broaden feminism to include women from diverse backgrounds and takes factors such as social class, race, ethnicity, and more into consideration. Among various feminists, Mohanty criticizes Western feminist discourses concerning women from the third world. She challenges the discourse that portrays third world women as a group with identical interests and desires. Mohanty's essay presents numerous examples that highlight this matter. For example, women in the third world are often depicted as victims of male violence due to their portrayal as subjected to female genital mutilation along with experiencing "rape, sexual assault, excision, infibulation, etc." (Mohanty, 1991, 58) This wave aims to highlight that women are not a homogeneous group but rather possess a range of identities and experiences.

Around 2012, a new wave of feminism emerged, known as the fourth wave of feminism. Unlike the previous waves, this wave has transitioned from traditional activism to digital spaces as it considered the internet and online platforms, particularly social media, as significant venues for feminist empowerment and activism. On social media platforms, feminist activists opt to utilize hashtags,

which typically consist of words or phrases preceded by the “#” symbol, to voice their opinions and articulate their viewpoints. In other words, these activists “practice consciousness-raising, but instead of meeting in a common room, they meet on social media under a common hashtag.” (Kowalska, 2017, 10) Through flourishing hashtags on social media platforms, diverse feminist activists have addressed a multitude of issues. For instance, the ‘#girlrising,’ like various hashtags, advocates for girls’ education. It is regarded as a demand for educating and empowering girls. (McPherson, 2014) To sum up, this wave of feminism strives to attain gender equality through the utilization of online platforms.

To conclude, feminism combines a wide range of ideologies, movements, and critiques that have evolved over time. From its foundation, feminism has continuously adapted to address the changing landscape of gender inequality and oppression. By exploring its definition, various types, and four waves, this article gains a deeper understanding of feminism and its ongoing pursuit of gender equity and social justice.

## **2.2 Exploring Arab-African Women’s Literary Contributions: A Concise Overview**

Before delving into the discourse on African and Arabic literature, it is crucial to provide a concise definition of literature. Literature “means not only what is written but what is voiced, what is expressed, what is invented, in whatever form.” (Krystal, 2014, 89) This includes media such as paintings, sculptures, music, poetry, texts, storytelling, and more. Following the discussion of literature in general, attention turns to African literature. From its name, African Literature covers literary genres that are written by Africans in different languages. (Martin & O’Meara, 1995) That is, it originated with oral traditions that evolved to include written texts such as poetry and narrative works. These texts often explore themes related to colonialism as the African continent was subjected to rule and influence by English and French colonizers, as well as themes of patriarchal dominance. African literature has trespassed national borders in an attempt to reach a global audience. This development was a result of the rise of intellectuals and educated individuals who began to reveal the realities and truths of their societies through writing. African literature gained global recognition through the works of numerous writers like the renowned Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, who is regarded as “the father of African literature in English” (Amouzou, 2007, 330) thanks to his 1959 renowned book *Things Fall Apart* through which he addresses “the impact of British colonization on the life of a settled African community.” (Smithe, 2002, 16) In addition to male literary contributions, African female writers play pivotal roles in advancing African literature onto the global stage through which they address numerous issues related to gender, patriarchy, and colonialism that exert control over women within their societies. One of these women is the Ghanaian author Ama Ata Aidoo and her 1971 novel *No Sweetness Here*, in which she gives “voice to women’s concerns as they face problems of urbanization and Westernization: standards of beauty, the absence of husbands and fathers, prostitution, clashing values and expectations.” (Martin & O’Meara, 1995, 301)

Being a part of African literature, Arab women’s literature is essential to recognize its integral role in depicting Arab societies. Through their novels and memoirs, female feminists examine social injustice, cultural disparities between genders in the Arab world, patriarchy, and different issues related to the Harem. There are others who address the notion of colonialism and the national resistance performed by both males and females who played a pivotal role in fighting against French colonialism in Morocco.

## **2.3 Exploring the Lives and Literary Legacies of Nawal El Saadawi and Fatima Mernissi**

This section introduces two pioneering voices, namely the Egyptian writer Nawal El Saadawi and the Moroccan novelist Fatima Mernissi, whose contributions have left a permanent mark on Arab women’s literature.

To start with, Nawal El Saadawi, born in October 1931 in the Egyptian village of Kafr Tahla, was a prominent figure known for her roles as a writer, advocate for women’s liberation, human rights activist, memoirist, novelist, and doctor. She held the position of the eldest sister among nine siblings, second only to her brother in age. Her father, Sayed Bey El Saadawi, was employed as an education inspector by the Ministry of Education. On the contrary, her mother, Zaynab, was responsible for managing the household. Nawal El Saadawi completed her studies at the medical school and later served as a resident doctor at Kasr Al-Aini Hospital starting in 1955. She wrote numerous novels, all of which tackle the issue of gender inequality in societies. (El Saadawi, 1999)

Moving to the Moroccan feminist, sociologist, and pioneer of Islamic feminism in Morocco, Fatima Mernissi was born in her paternal harem in Fez on September 27<sup>th</sup>, 1940 (Mernissi, 1994) and passed away in Rabat on November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015, after battling cancer. She assumed roles as a professor and lecturer at the Faculty of Letters at Mohamed V University in Rabat. Mernissi has written a variety of works. However, she gained widespread recognition for her seminal theoretical work *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, published in 1975, and her memoir *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* from 1994, in which she recounts her upbringing in the harem of her birth. (Fox, 2015)

The preceding section primarily focused on theoretical discussions, namely defining key concepts such as feminism and feminist literary criticism. It also provided an overview of African literature and introduced the authors Nawal El Saadawi and Fatima Mernissi. The following part, therefore, is mainly concerned with the methodology.

### **3. Methodology**

The present chapter introduces the hypotheses, objectives, questions, approaches, and instruments that are used to collect data and analyze the multiple facets of patriarchy and different forms of resistance that are tackled in the novels.

#### **3.1 Research Hypotheses and Objectives**

In this article, it is hypothesized that the portrayal of patriarchal structures in *A Daughter of Isis* and *Dreams of Trespass* reflects deeply rooted social norms that oppress women, restrict their autonomy, and perpetuate gender inequalities. Yet, this system is fought against by various female and male characters who engage in acts of resistance that aim at challenging traditional norms and asserting individual agency in pursuit of gender equality and social justice. Moreover, it is assumed that Arab women do not represent a coherent group that faces the same oppression simply because they belong to the Arab world, but rather, they experience different forms and shapes of patriarchy as each region has its peculiarities.

To measure the precision of the hypothesis, the present article aims to critically analyze the portrayal of patriarchal structures and forms of resistance employed by both women and men in *A Daughter of Isis* and *Dreams of Trespass*, with the objective of examining how these structures shape the lives of female characters. That is, this article targets identifying the various manifestations of patriarchy within the familial, social, and cultural contexts presented in the novels. It also aims to explore the various forms of resistance employed by both women and men in the mentioned novels to confront and challenge patriarchal oppression in Arab societies. Additionally, the current article seeks to compare and contrast the two novels in order to shed light on similarities and differences and, thus, unveil whether Arab women are a homogenous group or not.

#### **3.2 Research Questions**

This article aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do patriarchal structures manifest in the lives of female characters in *A Daughter of Isis* and *Dreams of Trespass*?
2. What are the forms of resistance used by both women and men in the two novels to confront patriarchal oppression in Arab societies?
3. To what extent are Arab women a homogenous group that faces the same oppression?

#### **3.3 Research Approach and Instruments**

The research methodology involves a qualitative approach that emphasizes the in-depth textual analysis of the literary works of two Arab novelists. This analysis seeks to explore patriarchal dynamics and gender relations within their novels. Moreover, content analysis is utilized in order to maintain objectivity and neutrality in the research process and ensure that interpretations remain unbiased.

### **4. Results and Discussion**

#### **4.1 Unveiling Patriarchal Realities: A Comparative Analysis of Women's Struggles in Nawal Saadawi's *A Daughter of Isis* and Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass***

##### **4.1.1 Exploring Patriarchal Constructs in *A Daughter of Isis***

Prior to the discussion of the various aspects of patriarchal discourses within the novel, it is crucial to shed light on the key words of this section so as to make it more comprehensive and understandable. That is, the main key word that must be highlighted is patriarchy. According to Hooks, it designates

A political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence. (2004, 18)

That is, patriarchy involves a systemic structure that divides power unequally and privileges men. This leads to the oppression, marginalization, victimization, and confinement of women within social norms, often reducing them to domestic roles. Having defined the key term, this article proceeds to analyze patriarchy in Nawal El Saadawi's novel *A Daughter of Isis*.

Indeed, *A Daughter of Isis* includes a variety of patriarchal discourses that range from the profound disdain for female newborns to the deeply ingrained practices of female circumcision. Additionally, the narrative sheds light on forms of sexism, the institution of marriage as a tool for male domination, the social definition of women in relation to men, and the objectification of women as mere sexual commodities. These aspects serve to explain the multifaceted nature of patriarchy within the novel.

The hatred towards female newborns is clearly depicted in *A Daughter of Isis*. Traditional customs in Egypt often placed the midwife in the role of facilitating the birth, a responsibility that unfortunately extended to prejudiced actions against female infants. That is, the midwife is “the first one who would let out a screaming ‘Yoo-yoo’ if her eyes fell on a penis (...) or to be the first to lower her head, show a solemn face, and become as silent as the dead if all she could find was a cleft.” (El Saadawi, 1999, 22) As for her grandfather, Habash, his attitude towards the birth of female infants mirrored the previous hatred for girls; “when the eleventh girl was born, it had been too much for Habash. He died of grief.” (El Saadawi, 1999, 35) These quotes serve to reveal the deep hatred and disappointment surrounding the birth of baby girls. In families governed by patriarchal beliefs, newborn females are unwelcomed and viewed as a source of shame and disgrace due to the potential to tarnish the family’s honor. This sentiment traces back to the pre-Islamic period when the killing of female infants was practiced since it led to a social stigma associated with having a daughter at home, as noted by El Saadawi: “That long before I was born female infants were buried alive.” (El Saadawi, 1999, 18)

Furthermore, Nawal El Saadawi recounts one of the most harrowing experiences of her childhood, which is undergoing female circumcision, as detailed in the novel. That is, she stated that “when I was six, the *daya* (midwife) came along holding a razor in her hands, pulled out my clitoris from between my thighs, and cut it off.” (El Saadawi, 1999, 13) Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that during that period, circumcision was a widespread practice for every young girl within Egyptian society, as indicated by the narrator’s clarification: “At a time when I had just reached the age of six, all girls were circumcised before they started menstruating. Not a single girl, whether from the city or the village, from a rich or a poor family, escaped.” (El Saadawi, 1999, 73) This experience left enduring wounds on the psyche of every Egyptian girl, as exemplified by Nawal El Saadawi herself, who struggled to fully heal from its effects. She contends that she had never forgotten “that day in the summer of 1937. Fifty-six years have gone by, but I still remember it, as though it were only yesterday. I lay in a pool of blood.” (El Saadawi, 1999, 74) The quotes above shed light on the enduring and painful experience that all Egyptian females experience during childhood. This cultural practice is deeply rooted in Egyptian society, as culturally, it is believed that female purity is achieved through circumcision. Furthermore, this practice carries a sexual dimension, with the belief that women’s sexuality is inherently uncontrollable. Consequently, there is a social imperative to circumcise women to prevent them from bringing dishonor to their families.

Gender discrimination is prominently depicted in the novel as men are favored over women and endowed with a sense of superiority and power. One character who exemplifies this sexism is El Saadawi’s grandmother, Sittil Hajja, who perpetuates the notion of male privilege by prioritizing males over females and believing that “a boy is worth fifteen girls at least.” (El Saadawi, 1999, 56) Sittil Hajja’s actions are immersed in gender bias as she holds the belief that males are the esteemed pride of the family, thereby demonstrating a clear preference for them. This partiality towards males is evident in her tendency to prioritize them, as evidenced by her belief that education “was only for boys. (...) she educated her son and the son of her husband from another woman. However, she did not educate a single one of her five daughters.” (El Saadawi, 1999, 102) In fact, Sittil Hajja believes that the sole destiny of girls is to enter into marriage, where their role primarily revolves around serving and satisfying their husbands within the confines of the home. She conveys this perspective to El Saadawi by expressing that “a girl in our village, as soon as she reaches puberty, hop, is married off at once.” (El Saadawi, 1999, 146) From these quotes, it becomes evident that Sittil Hajja serves as the custodian of patriarchal ideologies and customs.

Whenever there are individuals who promote sexism, there are inevitably others who are affected by this oppressive system. Foremost among them is Nawal El Saadawi, the central character who is profoundly influenced by the societal constraints imposed upon her. This is illustrated when the narrator is forbidden from going outside simply because she has reached adulthood, and thus, she has duties that must be done; “the house needs a cleaning! There’s a bowl of onions in the kitchen which have to be peeled! The bathroom floor needs to be scrubbed.” (El Saadawi, 1999, 155) Even when it comes to the narrator’s success in studies, “No-one either in my mother’s or my father’s family rejoiced” (El Saadawi, 1999, 155) because their sadness over her brother’s failure surpasses the happiness of her success. In fact, El Saadawi’s family perceived her accomplishments as unimportant because they believed that her success would be overshadowed by marriage, wherein she would be expected to prioritize serving her husband. This idea is manifested in the following questions: “What’s the use of a certificate if she’s destined to be married?! What’s the use of her cleverness at school if she’s a dunce in the kitchen?” (El Saadawi, 1999, 178) Likewise, El Saadawi’s mother experienced discrimination based on her gender, as “her father had chased her out of school with a stick” (El Saadawi, 1999, 24) so as to get married, and thus, her mother “owned nothing, had no money” (El Saadawi, 1999, 33) and is imprisoned in “the world of the kitchen, smelling of onions and garlic.” (El Saadawi, 1999, 70) The discussion of sexism in this novel is highly manifested through several female characters who endure this system of discrimination and lower them to second class citizens.

Besides, society itself offers privileges to men over women in various aspects because it is controlled by patriarchal ideologies. For instance, the Ministry of Education appeared to perceive girls as intellectually inferior to boys, as evidenced by “the stage of secondary school lasted five years for boys but for girls it was six years.” (El Saadawi, 1999, 291) Even when the university first opened its doors, it “accepted only male students” (El Saadawi, 1999, 305) until the 1930s when it started accepting females. However, girls did not possess the ultimate freedom to choose academic paths such as science, medicine, or engineering; instead, they were encouraged to pursue literature, often referred to as “adab” in Arabic, which connotes good manners and politeness. This cultural expectation stemmed from good manners and behaviors, which were expected of girls but not necessarily of boys. For boys, the common saying was “Nothing shames a man but his pocket.” (El Saadawi, 1999, 312)

Furthermore, marriage is often viewed as the essence of patriarchy because it subjugates women to the point where they are reduced to mere wives who are expected to serve their husbands at home. This mentality begins right from the onset, particularly on the first night of marriage, when it is culturally expected for a husband to assert his dominance by physically beating his wife, thereby establishing his superiority as the breadwinner and head of the family. That is, the custom in Egypt was that.

Every husband had to beat his bride before he did anything else. She had to try the taste of his stick before she could sample the taste of his food [...] she should be ready for a beating if she did not do as she was told. (El Saadawi, 1999, 34)

“This was to make sure that she realized that (...) her husband ruled over her.”( El Saadawi, 1999, 149 – 150) Marriage is also perceived as a destroyer of women’s dreams, a feeling echoed through various characters who were hindered from realizing their aspirations, as exemplified by El Saadawi’s cousin Zaynab, who “sat in the midst of the girls enveloped in her embroidered wedding gown, her head lowered to the ground, wiping off her tears with the edge of her sleeve” (El Saadawi, 1999, 148) because her dream of becoming a teacher had disappeared. On the contrary, her parents were overjoyed because of her marriage as they celebrated the white towel stained with her blood without considering her feelings; her father “stood up and started to move with a new pride amongst men.” (El Saadawi, 1999, 149) Furthermore, marriage reduces women to the role of mere machines tasked with producing and raising children. To illustrate, Nawal El Saadawi described how, shortly after the wedding ceremony, her mother.

Would be lying on the bed in this man’s arms, her eyes closed, being impregnated with her first child, without taking off her clothes or opening her eyes [...] so year after year, [...] my mother became pregnant ten times [...] without ever having known that thing which is described as sexual pleasure. (El Saadawi, 1999, 25-26)

The cited quotations display the severe limitations placed on the futures of Egyptian women. They are predominantly confined to the institution of marriage and are viewed solely as submissive to men within society. To sum up, women’s roles in patriarchal societies are restricted to domestic duties, childbearing, and serving husbands.

The quotes above depict the wide disparities in rights and opportunities between males and females. Women are consistently subjected to unequal treatment, firstly by their families and by society at large. Sociocultural beliefs perpetuate the notion that women are inherently less significant, less intelligent, and less powerful, which means they are reduced to lower ranks across various domains of life. Hence, women are deemed worth only half of a man and are relegated to the status of secondary citizens.

#### **4.1.2 Examining Patriarchal Paradigms in Dreams of Trespass**

*Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* is a memoir written by the Moroccan writer Fatima Mernissi in 1994, originally in English. It sheds light on the significant events from Mernissi’s childhood and highlights her experiences in both a traditional harem in Fez and a similarly traditional but geographically more open harem in the countryside during the 1940s. The memoir delves into the concept of “hudud,” or sacred boundaries, which women are forbidden to cross, yet they yearn to trespass these limitations. Thus, this memoir explores various facets of patriarchal discourse that dominate and constrain women, including the institution of the harem and the influence of men.

To begin with, the primary mechanism of patriarchy that oppresses women is the institution of the harem. This system is perceived as “a private space” (Mernissi, 1994, 61) and “a prison” (Mernissi, 1994, 55) where women are marginalized, excluded, and deprived of many, if not all, rights. Firstly, the gate that acts as a barrier between the harem and the outside world is seen as a hindrance that prevents women from experiencing freedom. Mernissi argued that “OUR HOUSE GATE was a definite hudud, or frontier because you needed permission to step in or out. Every move had to be justified, and even getting to the gate was a procedure.” (Mernissi, 1994 21) Within the harem, women’s lives are burdened by a multitude of rules that are imposed under the guise of

tradition and religion. The most pivotal rule that sheds light on the purpose behind the establishment of the harem is to confine women and exclude them from active participation within society. For instance, Mernissi highlights that her "mother could not even step out of the gate without asking multiple permissions, and even then, all she could do was visit the shrine of Moulay Driss (...) or her brother who happened to live down the street," (Mernissi, 1994, 39) with the condition that they must be accompanied by a male member from the household. Consequently, "women did not go out shopping. They were not allowed to simply step out to the *Qissaria*, that part of the Medina where heaps of wonderful silks and velvets of all colors piled up in the tiny shops." (Mernissi, 1994, 212) In addition to requiring male accompaniment whenever a woman wished to venture into the outside world, they were forced to wear the *haik*, which Chama perceived as "designed to make a woman's trip through the streets so torturous that she would quickly tire from the effort, rush back home, and never dream of going out again" (Mernissi, 1994, 118). Additionally, some may argue that the harem plays a significant role in preserving the Moroccan tradition, as evidenced in the argument of Mernissi's father: "the frontier protected cultural identity, and that if Arab women started imitating European ones by dressing provocatively, smoking cigarettes, and running around with their hair uncovered, there would be only one culture left. Ours would be dead." (Mernissi, 1994, 180-181)

Like the harem in Fez, there are no notable distinctions between it and the harem of Grandfather Tazi in the countryside, except for the absence of geographical boundaries. This implies that one "carried the harem within." (Mernissi, 1994, 61) Mernissi's grandmother Yasmina had the same viewpoint as she said: "To be stuck in a harem simply meant that a woman had lost her freedom of movement." (Mernissi, 1994, 34) One cannot avoid the reality that women are also treated as mere possessions owned by men, as reflected in Yasmina's statement that whenever women happen to encounter a peasant, he would "knew that the women on the farm belonged to Grandfather Tazi and that he had no right to look at them." (Mernissi, 1994, 62) Furthermore, Yasmina would highlight the unequal and unjust division of labor by illustrating the extent to which women are deprived and considered less valuable than men. She did so by giving an example that "both men and women worked from dawn until very late at night. But men made money, and women did not." (Mernissi, 1994, 63) The harem is depicted as a symbol of confinement and deprivation for women. It represents a space where women are kept secluded from the outside world, and their freedom and opportunities are diminished by patriarchal norms and traditions. Consequently, the harem serves to reinforce gender inequalities where women are relegated to subordinate roles and denied agency over their own lives.

Moreover, education for females was not considered important except "to know the *hudud*, the sacred frontiers" (Mernissi, 1994, 3) since they are destined to be married and become wives meant to serve their husbands. Additionally, mothers were not allowed to pursue education, as evidenced when the mother requested to attend literacy classes, but the family council refused her demand because "schools are for little girls, not for mothers." (Mernissi, 1994, 200) It seems that education for females is depicted as severely limited, confined within the narrow boundaries of traditional gender roles and expectations. Education serves primarily as a means to perpetuate traditional roles and prepare girls for their eventual roles as wives and mothers. Their learning is restricted to domestic skills, religious teachings, and basic literacy, which reinforces the idea that a woman's primary sphere is the household.

The portrayal of patriarchal coercion in *Dreams of Trespass* reveals the general conditions under which Moroccan women live by displaying how patriarchy manifests in both public and private spheres. Therefore, in advocating for women's right to education as the key to liberation, Mernissi exposes the factors that weaken women and hinder them from becoming active citizens with the ability to participate alongside men in all aspects of life. She stated that "the problem with women today is that they are powerless. And powerlessness stems from ignorance and a lack of education." (Mernissi, 1994, 170)

To sum up, the analysis of patriarchy in Nawal El Saadawi's *A Daughter of Isis* and Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* reveals a profound comprehension of the influence of patriarchal systems on the lives of women in Arab societies. Through a detailed examination of these novels, it becomes evident that patriarchal structures not only dictate gender roles and expectations but also perpetuate systems of oppression and inequality. All in all, the analysis of patriarchy in *A Daughter of Isis* and *Dreams of Trespass* calls for the urgent need for social and cultural transformation to deconstruct patriarchal structures and advance gender equality in Arab societies. By strengthening the voices of women and exposing the injustices perpetuated by patriarchal systems, these novels serve as powerful mechanisms for change by inviting readers to envision a world where women are no longer bound by the constraints of patriarchy but rather empowered to live their lives with dignity, autonomy, and freedom. The upcoming section, therefore, will focus primarily on emphasizing the brave aspects of resistance that are depicted in the two novels.

## **4.2 Breaking Chains: Exploring Acts of Resistance in *A Daughter of Isis* and *Dreams of Trespass***

### **4.2.1 Challenging Patriarchy: Resistance in *A Daughter of Isis***

There are numerous individuals in *A Daughter of Isis* who resist and oppose the patriarchal ideologies that dominate their society, including Nawal El Saadawi herself, her mother Zaynab, her father Sayed Bey, and her grandmother Sittil Hajja.

To start with, Nawal El Saadawi highly resisted and challenged the patriarchal norms of her society from childhood to the present. In other words, the narrator challenged and condemned patriarchal norms by prioritizing her education to the point of becoming an exemplary figure along with confronting harassers, rejecting stereotypes that confine women to submissive roles, and opposing female circumcision. The narrator's decision to pursue education is depicted as a means of escaping the confines of domestic life as she stated: "I hated the kitchen [...] school was the only place that saved me from closed walls and kitchen chores." (El Saadawi, 1999, 52) As anticipated by Nawal El Saadawi, engaging in studies offered her a chance to escape the confines of domestic life, as she contends when talking about herself: "Their diligent daughter was capable of obtaining a 'licence' or a baccalaureat herself. Her future no longer lay in marriage like the submissive, idle girls waiting at home for a bridegroom to appear." (El Saadawi, 1999, 252). Furthermore, Nawal El Saadawi possessed the strength and bravery to confront and directly challenge those who harassed her as noticed by the narrator's statement: "sometimes I would turn round suddenly and slap one of them in the face." (El Saadawi, 1999, 247) She also demonstrated the courage to confront the administration of the medical school namely the dean by demanding that she deserves "to be exempted from paying fees because of [her] high grades in school." (El Saadawi, 1999, 323) Moreover, Nawal El Saadawi rejected the notion of female circumcision as a form of purity by stating, "I was able to protect my daughter and many other girls." (El Saadawi, 1999, 73) To conclude, Nawal El Saadawi emerged as a dynamic figure who actively fought against patriarchal systems and gender-based discrimination through multifaceted means.

Moreover, Nawal El Saadawi's mother, Zaynab, also had an influence within the household as she challenged the patriarchal system. She is credited with providing the narrator with the opportunity to pursue her studies, as she would urge her husband by saying: "throw Nawal in the fire, and she will come unhurt" (El Saadawi, 1999, 3) These encouragements served as motivations that drove Nawal El Saadawi towards her pursuit and success in her educational career. Furthermore, despite her dependence on her husband, Zaynab is seen as a rebellious woman who fiercely protects her dignity, as she "preferred to leave him rather than sacrifice her self-respect and pride." (El Saadawi, 1999, 7) To put it differently, despite being financially dependent on her husband and holding no social position beyond that of a wife, the mother refused to tolerate any form of humiliation. Zaynab has undeniably contributed to challenging patriarchy by empowering her daughter to pursue her education and have a dream to fulfill.

Alongside her mother, Nawal's father stands out as a symbol of resistance against the patriarchal system despite being a man. The Egyptian writer El Saadawi emphasizes this by stating that "my father believed in education (...) for him, education was important for girls as well as boys." (El Saadawi, 1999, 102) In fact, he "had nine sons and daughters and, all of whom were in school." (El Saadawi, 1999, 324) Furthermore, he treated his wife as an equal human being rather than oppressing or controlling her. This is evidenced by the fact that he "never raised his voice when speaking to her" (El Saadawi, 1999, 6),

never stayed out late at night, never had relations with a woman other than my mother. Law and jurisprudence of Allah gave him the absolute right to divorce and to marry four women, but he had never used this right, was a devoted husband, helped my mother with the chores of the house. (El Saadawi, 1999, 186)

Besides, he used to "wake up in the morning to prepare tea and breakfast for me, or a lunch box to take with me" (El Saadawi, 1999, 325) whenever his wife was tired and unable to assist in preparing their daughter for school. These quotes illustrate that Nawal El Saadawi's father, Sayed Bey, does not embody the model of a tyrannical husband and father who issues commands, but rather, he actively shares household responsibilities with his wife.

Despite being a traditional woman influenced by the patriarchal system, Nawal El Saadawi's grandmother, Sittil Hajja, demonstrated moments of resistance against gender inequality. While she typically prioritized boys over girls, there were moments when she challenged this system. When her husband Habash passed away, she declined passivity and "worked the land alone, labored with her hoe from the moment the sun rose to the moment it set." (El Saadawi, 1999, 85) This shows that women also have the capacity to be breadwinners. Moreover, she was capable of defending her son Sayed Bey after being beaten by the guards of the chief by lifting "her big rough hand high up in the air and shouted: 'The one who can beat my son has not yet been created,' then brought it down on his face with all her force." (El Saadawi, 1999, 86) These quotes illustrate Sittil Hajja's indirect and perhaps unconscious struggle against the patriarchal norms of society. She challenges cultural stereotypes that depict women as weak and incapable of standing up to men, as well as incapable of taking on household responsibilities independently.

To conclude, *A Daughter of Isis* portrays numerous individuals, including Nawal El Saadawi herself, her mother Zaynab, her father Sayed Bey, and her grandmother Sittil Hajja, who actively resist and challenge the patriarchal ideologies rooted within their society.



#### 4.2.2 Rebelliousness and Liberation: Resisting Patriarchy in Dreams of Trespass

Likewise, Fatima Mernissi's memoir *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* introduces several characters who reject the patriarchal system, which diminishes and marginalizes women by reducing them to the role of obedient wives, namely Mernissi's mother, Chama, the monarch of Morocco in addition to many secondary characters like Ahmed the doorkeeper, Krisha the driver as well as Mernissi's uncle Karim.

Mernissi's mother stands out as a character who actively opposed and campaigned against the unjust system. She criticized the harem and its regulations by arguing that they only served to weaken women's position in both private and public spheres. For instance, she rejected that men would cease working if women were permitted to leave the harem by refusing the notion that women were mere distractions; she argues: "the French do not imprison their wives behind walls, [...] they let them run wild in the local souk (market), and everyone has fun, and still the work gets done." (Mernissi, 1994, 42) Moreover, she yearned for independence alongside her nuclear family. She expressed her desire to live separately from her father by saying: "Whoever heard of ten birds living together squashed into a single nest? [...] it is not natural to live in a large group, unless your objective is to make people feel miserable." (Mernissi, 1994, 76) Furthermore, the mother played a significant role in advancing Mernissi's life from tradition to modernity by introducing changes in her dressing code. She emphasized the abandonment of traditional clothing and encouraged her daughter to wear Western clothes by telling her that she needs to "plan to be modern, express it through what you wear; otherwise, they will shove you behind the gates." (Mernissi, 1994, 85) In an effort to match Princess Aisha, daughter of King Mohamed V and one of the advocates for women's rights in Morocco, the mother sought to transform her daughter by encouraging her to wear "both long caftans and short French dresses." (Mernissi, 1994, 180) The mother also encouraged her daughter to go to school so as to free herself from the dependency's chains by studying "hard to get a diploma and become someone important, and to build a house." (Mernissi, 1994, 179) The mother's encouragement often transformed into delight whenever she perceived her daughter as capable of comprehending the teachings conveyed to her. Similar joy was evident when Mernissi moved from the traditional Koranic school to a primary school under the French system, where "girls learned mathematics, foreign languages, and geography, often were taught by male teachers, and played gymnastics in shorts." (Mernissi, 1994, 197) She perceives education as the key to liberating women from the constraints that confine them to the private sphere as she believes that education can equip her daughters with "a better life, full of opportunities, [...] and travel. They will discover the world, understand it, and eventually participate in transforming it." (Mernissi, 1994, 200)

Expressing herself and her desires freely through her music and performances, Fatima's cousin Chama was also a rebellious woman because of her theater in which she portrayed and represented various female figures who criticized patriarchy and campaigned for women's rights. In other words, Chama's theater performances served as a form of resistance and empowerment for the women in the harem by allowing them to imagine a world where they could break free from the confines of traditional gender roles and expectations. Through her portrayals of strong and independent female characters, Chama challenged the status quo and encouraged others to question the patriarchal structures that governed their lives by portraying various feminists like Huda Sha'rawi. This woman, who was named the pioneer of Arab feminism, brought significant social changes in Egypt within a short period. Her remarkable impact demonstrated the potential for rapid transformation when women are empowered to challenge patriarchal norms and advocate for their rights. Through invoking Sha'rawi, Chama highlighted the transformative power of women's activism in reshaping traditional societies and advancing gender equality. In addition to many feminist icons, Sha'rawi had

Tossed away her veil when she led the first official women's street march against the British in 1919 and influenced legislators to pass numerous important laws, including one in 1924, which raised the legal marriage age for girls to 16. She also was so utterly disgusted by the newly independent Egyptian state, formed in 1922, when they passed the Constitution of 1923 restricting the vote to males, that she created the Egyptian Feminist Union and successfully fought for a woman's right to vote. (Mernissi, 1994, 131)

Additionally, Chama depicted other feminists who highly opposed gender inequality and expressed their hatred for the veil, such as Aisha Taymour, who "write fiery poetry against the veil" (Mernissi, 1994, 129), and Zaynab Fawwaz who "inundate the Arab press with articles and poetry, in which she vented her hatred of the veil and condemned the seclusion of women." (Mernissi, 1994, 130) Therefore, Chama challenged the patriarchal norms that dominate both the harem and Moroccan society by summoning influential women. These figures display the hidden strength of women and inspire them to call for their independence by urging them to take control of their destinies instead of being passive servants who are restricted within the confines of the harem.

Even when it comes to the head of the country, the deceased Moroccan King Mohamed V fought for women's rights and emancipation by allowing his daughter Princess Aisha to "making speeches about women's liberation" (Mernissi, 1994, 199) and "urging women, in both Arabic and French, to take up modern ways." (Mernissi, 1994, 200) Supporting their monarch, the nationalists embraced his initiatives to empower women and struggled to secure them with a range of rights with the goal of improving their circumstances. Their vision was to forge a new Morocco that is characterized by gender harmony and equality and guided by the belief that "every woman was to have the same right to education as man, as well as the right to enjoy monogamy." (Mernissi, 1994, 35) Moreover, as the nationalists established new institutions advocated for by the king, "the religious authorities of the *Qaraouiyine* Mosque (...) supported women's rights to go to school." (Mernissi, 1994, 196) Consequently, people started sending their daughters to school with "bare faces and bare legs, in Western dresses with the distinctive Western handbags on their shoulder" (Mernissi, 1994, 119) instead of wearing the traditional *haik* or *djellaba*.

One cannot overlook the secondary characters who resist the unjust system in their own ways. For example, Ahmed, the doorkeeper of the Mernissi household, frequently assumed responsibility for caring for his children because his wife Luza was employed as a maid elsewhere as she was "a first-rate cook and accepted occasional assignments outside our home when the money was good." (Mernissi, 1994, 21) Krisha, the driver, challenged the notion that women are solely meant to serve their husbands by assisting women in carrying heavy household items from the river to the farm. More than this, he expressed disinterest in exerting power over his wife or giving her orders. This deed indicates that he had a different perspective on gender roles. When discussing his wife about the household chores, which are traditionally seen as her responsibility, Krisha expressed a different viewpoint: "I am not going to divorce her for that. We can manage." (Mernissi, 1994, 71) Additionally, Fatima Mernissi's uncle, Karim, took advantage of the opportunity when his wife and children went to her father's house due to her dissatisfaction with harem life; at this point, she was "excusing his actions by saying that he preferred to give in to his wife's wishes rather than forfeit his marriage." (Mernissi, 1994, 77)

To summarize, Fatima Mernissi's memoir *Dreams of Trespass* depicts a multitude of characters who challenge the patriarchal system, which diminishes and marginalizes women. Among these characters are Mernissi's mother, Chama, the king of Morocco, as well as secondary characters like Ahmed, the doorkeeper, Krisha, the driver, and Mernissi's uncle, Karim. It is fitting to conclude this section with Fatima Mernissi's call for equality, as she stated

Arab World, in which men and women could hug each other and dance away, with no frontiers between them, no fears [...] a serene planet on which houses had no gates and windows opened wide onto safe streets. I would help them walk in a world where the difference needed no veil. (Mernissi, 1994, 110-111)

### **4.3 Comparing and Contrasting *A Daughter of Isis* and *Dreams of Trespass*: Similarities and Differences**

#### **4.3.1 Exploring Commonalities in *A Daughter of Isis* and *Dreams of Trespass***

Based on the readings of the two autobiographies, there are several similarities and differences between the Egyptian writer Nawal El Saadawi and the Moroccan writer Fatima Mernissi. Starting with similarities, both writers experienced similar historical contexts during their childhood, with Egypt under British occupation and Morocco facing colonization by the Spanish and French. Additionally, both writers' fathers did not practice polygamy and treated their wives as companions rather than mere servants. Similarly, both writers received support from their mothers in pursuing education and attending school. Moreover, El Saadawi and Mernissi themselves enjoyed access to education and achieved high levels of success in their respective fields, with El Saadawi becoming a doctor and Mernissi becoming a university professor. These similarities demonstrate shared experiences of navigating patriarchal structures and wishing for personal and professional fulfillment in their respective societies.

#### **4.3.2 Contrasting Portrayals in *A Daughter of Isis* and *Dreams of Trespass***

However, Nawal El Saadawi and Fatima Mernissi also differ in several aspects. Firstly, they had different family structures; El Saadawi lived in a nuclear family with her father and eight siblings, whereas Mernissi grew up in an extended family within a harem, including her father's and brother's households, as well as divorced and widowed relatives. Despite both advocating for their daughters' education, Mernissi's mother had more influence over family celebrations. Additionally, Mernissi often relied on her cousin Samir for assistance, while El Saadawi demonstrated independence at an early age by confronting challenges herself, such as requesting fee exemptions and standing up against harassment. Their experiences also differed; El Saadawi endured circumcision at a young age and experienced imprisonment, while Mernissi did not face such traumas. Moreover, El Saadawi had to relocate frequently to access education by living in villages with limited schooling options, whereas Mernissi had access to schools in the city established by nationalists.

## 5. Conclusion

All in all, Nawal El Saadawi and Fatima Mernissi emerged as influential Arab feminists who dedicated their lives to the emancipation of women in the Arab world. Through their writings, they fearlessly exposed various facets of patriarchy that impact women globally and locally. Their books serve as powerful tools for shedding light on the struggles faced by women and advocating for their rights. A significant factor that contributes to their impact is their unique life experiences, which differ from those of many women in Egypt and Moroccan harems. Both El Saadawi and Mernissi were encouraged by their families to pursue education and resist oppressive norms. This enables them to explore diverse paths of success, resistance, and productivity. In fact, their works continue to inspire countless individuals to challenge patriarchal systems and strive for gender equality, making El Saadawi and Mernissi pivotal figures in the ongoing struggle for women's rights in the Arab world and beyond.

This research paper holds significant value in the field of gender studies. This work has not only explored and introduced various key concepts but also conducted a thorough analysis of how Arab literature portrays women. Moreover, this article is an attempt to make a meaningful contribution to the field of gender studies and to serve as a valuable resource for students interested in exploring related topics.

Upon delving deeply into the analysis of the two novels, it becomes clear that women in the Arab world cannot be categorized as a singular and homogeneous group. Although there are shared experiences, there are numerous differences and variations among them. These differences exhibit the diversity that exists across different regions, which demonstrates that every region is characterized by unique characteristics and peculiarities within the Arab world.

This study faces several limitations. First, it focuses on only two literary works, which may limit the scope and relevance of the findings. Moreover, the focus on patriarchy and resistance may overlook other important themes that are presented in the texts.

Future research should consider expanding the analysis to include a wider range of literary works from diverse cultural and historical backgrounds to enhance relevance. Comparative studies between different authors and regions could provide a deeper understanding. Examining the impact of these literary works on readers and exploring their educational potential could also provide valuable perspectives.

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