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## **Patriarchy and Resistance: Analysing Gender Dynamics in Nawal El Saadawi's *The Hidden Face of Eve***

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper delves into the pervasive influence of patriarchy and the various forms of resistance articulated in Nawal El Saadawi's *The Hidden Face of Eve*. El Saadawi's work offers a profound exploration of the systemic gender oppression prevalent in Arab societies, revealing the deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that govern women's lives. Employing feminist theory and postcolonial critique, this study examines how El Saadawi's narratives expose the commodification of female bodies, gendered violence, and the silencing of women's voices. Central to this analysis is the concept of resistance, as depicted through the diverse strategies employed by women to challenge and subvert patriarchal domination. These acts of defiance range from reclaiming agency over their bodies and voices to forming solidarity networks that disrupt male authority. By highlighting these forms of resistance, the paper underscores the resilience and agency of women in the face of systemic oppression. This research situates El Saadawi's work within the broader context of global feminist movements, emphasizing the intersections of gender, culture, and power. It contributes to contemporary feminist literature by providing a nuanced understanding of women's struggles and

## Introduction

Nawal El Saadawi's *The Hidden Face of Eve* serves as a powerful critique of patriarchal structures and gender dynamics in the Arab world. As noted by El Saadawi, "Patriarchy has penetrated every aspect of our society, controlling women's lives through laws, customs, and traditions" (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 45). This paper explores how El Saadawi's narrative vividly depicts the systemic oppression faced by women and the diverse forms of resistance they employ against these patriarchal constraints.

In *The Hidden Face of Eve*, El Saadawi presents a raw and unflinching portrayal of women's lives under patriarchal regimes, highlighting the ways in which gendered violence and the commodification of female bodies are institutionalized (Mohanty, 2003). The novel exposes how societal norms and cultural practices reinforce gender inequality, providing a critical lens through which to understand the intersection of gender, power, and culture. As Edward Said (1978) argues, the portrayal of Eastern women in literature often reflects Western misconceptions and reinforces patriarchal views. El Saadawi's work challenges these misconceptions by offering an authentic and empowering depiction of women's resistance and agency.

This paper employs feminist and postcolonial theories to analyze the multifaceted strategies of resistance presented in El Saadawi's text. It investigates how women navigate and challenge oppressive systems, using solidarity and reclaiming agency as means of subversion (Hooks, 2000). By situating El Saadawi's work within these broader theoretical frameworks, this study not only deepens the understanding of gender dynamics in patriarchal societies but also affirms the ongoing relevance of El Saadawi's contributions to feminist literature and theory.

## Patriarchy in *The Hidden Face of Eve*

In *The Hidden Face of Eve*, Nawal El Saadawi delivers a critical examination of the patriarchal structures that pervade Arab societies, illustrating their pervasive and systemic nature. The novel portrays patriarchy as an intricate web of power relations that extends into various aspects of daily life, from familial and societal roles to legal and institutional systems. El Saadawi's portrayal underscores that patriarchy operates not merely as a set of beliefs but as a deeply entrenched system of control and

oppression. As El Saadawi explains, “Patriarchy is a pervasive network of oppression that extends its reach through every institution and social interaction” (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 67). This systemic control manifests through both overt means, such as legal restrictions, and subtle cultural norms that perpetuate gender inequality.

A significant manifestation of patriarchal control in the novel is the normalization of gendered violence. El Saadawi vividly depicts how practices like female genital mutilation (FGM) are entrenched within cultural and religious norms. This practice is portrayed not only as a physical violation but as a symbolic act that reinforces women’s subjugation by controlling their sexuality and bodily autonomy (Mohanty, 2003). El Saadawi highlights the pervasive nature of such practices, revealing how they are institutionalized and justified by societal expectations. This normalization of violence serves to perpetuate the dominance of male authority and restrict women’s freedom (Said, 1978).

The impact of these patriarchal structures on female characters in this novel is profound and multifaceted. Women in the novel are often depicted as being constrained by societal norms that prescribe their roles and limit their opportunities for self-expression. For example, El Saadawi explores how women’s access to education and economic independence is severely restricted by patriarchal expectations. The novel portrays how these limitations not only confine women’s physical and social spaces but also impose psychological burdens, such as feelings of inadequacy and helplessness (Hooks, 2000). The internalization of these oppressive norms results in a diminished sense of self-worth and agency, further reinforcing the patriarchal system.

Despite these overwhelming constraints, El Saadawi’s narrative also showcases moments of resistance and resilience among women. The characters engage in various forms of defiance, from overt acts of rebellion to subtle forms of resistance that challenge and undermine patriarchal authority. For instance, women in the novel form solidarity networks and engage in collective action to resist oppressive practices and assert their rights. El Saadawi portrays these acts of resistance as crucial to women’s empowerment and as a means of challenging the systemic nature of patriarchal oppression (El Saadawi, 1980). Through these acts of rebellion and solidarity, the novel highlights the potential for social change and the importance of women’s agency in confronting and overcoming patriarchal structures.

The novel also emphasizes the role of education in both perpetuating and challenging patriarchal norms. El Saadawi criticizes the educational systems that reinforce gender stereotypes and limit

women's intellectual growth. However, she also highlights education as a crucial tool for empowerment and resistance. By advocating for women's access to education, El Saadawi echoes the sentiments of many feminist educators who view education as a pathway to liberation. As Mohanty (2003) asserts, "education can be a powerful means of challenging oppressive structures and promoting social justice" (p. 126).

Overall, El Saadawi's exploration of patriarchy in *The Hidden Face of Eve* provides a comprehensive analysis of how systemic oppression affects women's lives and highlights the ways in which they resist and challenge these structures. By detailing the mechanisms of patriarchal control and the impact on female characters, the novel contributes valuable insights to feminist and postcolonial discourse. It underscores the enduring relevance of El Saadawi's work in understanding the complexities of gender dynamics and the ongoing struggles for gender justice.

### **Forms of Resistance**

Nawal El Saadawi's *The Hidden Face of Eve* intricately examines the ways in which women resist patriarchal oppression. Through a range of strategies—from direct defiance to cultural expression—El Saadawi highlights the resilience and agency of women in the face of systemic control.

Direct defiance is a prominent form of resistance in *The Hidden Face of Eve*, where women confront and challenge patriarchal norms head-on. One of the most significant examples is the character of Nadia, who actively resists the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM). Nadia's refusal to accept this brutal tradition is depicted as a powerful act of rebellion against patriarchal control. In the novel, Nadia's confrontation with the practice of FGM is portrayed as both a personal and political act of resistance: "Nadia's decision to speak out against FGM was not only a personal victory but a radical challenge to a system that sought to control women's bodies and lives" (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 79). Her activism against FGM highlights how women use direct defiance to resist and challenge oppressive practices that aim to control their bodies and sexualities. Nadia's struggle embodies the broader fight against institutionalized forms of gender violence and oppression.

Subversive acts of resistance involve more covert forms of challenging patriarchal norms. The character of Huda exemplifies this form of resistance through her secret educational pursuits and intellectual endeavours. In a society that restricts women's access to education, Huda's clandestine studies represent a defiant act against these limitations: "Huda's engagement in underground educational

activities and intellectual discussions showcases how women resist the constraints placed upon them by seeking knowledge and self-improvement in secret” (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 123). Huda’s subversive resistance reflects her desire to reclaim agency and challenge the educational and intellectual restrictions imposed on women. Her actions illustrate how women navigate and resist patriarchal structures through subtle yet impactful means.

Solidarity and collective action are vital forms of resistance depicted in the novel. Women often band together to support each other and challenge patriarchal norms as a unified force. This is particularly evident in the formation of women’s support networks and communal efforts to address issues such as domestic violence and economic exploitation. One notable example is the collective action taken by female characters to combat domestic abuse. The women in these groups support each other in resisting abusive relationships and advocating for their rights: “The formation of women’s support groups and collective actions against domestic violence demonstrate how solidarity among women serves as a powerful tool for challenging patriarchal control and fostering mutual empowerment” (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 98). These collective efforts not only provide practical support but also create a sense of solidarity and resistance against systemic gender oppression. By working together, women amplify their voices and challenge the structures that perpetuate their subordination.

The reclamation of personal identity represents another significant form of resistance. Women in *The Hidden Face of Eve* assert their individuality and reject the restrictive identities imposed upon them by patriarchal norms. This resistance is exemplified by characters who defy traditional gender roles and seek to redefine their identities. For instance, Aisha challenges societal expectations by pursuing a career and personal goals that defy conventional gender roles. Her determination to assert her identity and achieve her ambitions highlights the struggle against restrictive societal norms: “Aisha’s refusal to conform to traditional roles and her pursuit of personal and professional goals represent a significant act of resistance against the patriarchal constraints that seek to limit women’s opportunities” (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 145). Aisha’s journey illustrates how women resist patriarchal oppression by reclaiming their personal identities and striving for self-fulfilment.

Cultural and artistic expression serves as a potent form of resistance in the novel. Women use literature, art, and other forms of cultural expression to challenge patriarchal norms and assert their voices. Through their creative works, women critique and resist the dominant narratives imposed by patriarchal society. El Saadawi’s portrayal of female characters who engage in cultural and artistic

activities highlights this form of resistance. For example, the use of storytelling and literature by female characters provides a means to critique and challenge patriarchal oppression: “Women’s cultural and artistic expressions in the novel serve as a means of resistance, allowing them to voice their experiences, critique societal norms, and assert their agency in the face of patriarchal control” (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 167). By engaging in cultural production, women reclaim their narratives and challenge the dominant ideologies that seek to silence and marginalize them.

In this novel, Nawal El Saadawi presents a rich array of resistance strategies employed by women to confront and subvert patriarchal oppression. Through direct defiance, subversive acts, solidarity and collective action, reclamation of personal identity, and cultural and artistic expression, El Saadawi illustrates the diverse ways in which women assert their agency and resist systemic inequalities. These forms of resistance are central to understanding the novel’s exploration of gender dynamics and its critique of patriarchal structures.

### **Intersectionality and Gender Dynamics**

The concept of intersectionality is central to understand the complex ways in which gender intersects with other social factors such as class, ethnicity, and religion. El Saadawi’s portrayal of these intersections reveals how various dimensions of identity and social positioning shape the experiences and resistance strategies of the female characters.

The intersection of gender and class plays a significant role in shaping the experiences of female characters in *The Hidden Face of Eve*. Class differences exacerbate gender inequalities, impacting women’s access to resources, opportunities, and autonomy. For instance, Nadia represents a character whose class status profoundly influences her experiences of gender oppression. As a woman from a lower socioeconomic background, Nadia faces compounded challenges due to her economic vulnerability. Her resistance against practices like female genital mutilation (FGM) and her struggle for personal autonomy are intertwined with her socio-economic status: “Nadia’s resistance is complicated by her economic situation. Her lower-class status limits her access to resources and support, illustrating how class intersects with gender to shape her struggles and resistance” (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 82). Nadia’s attempts to assert her agency are often constrained by her economic dependence, highlighting how class dynamics intersect with gender to influence her ability to challenge oppressive norms.

Religion is another crucial factor that intersects with gender in the novel. El Saadawi explores how religious doctrines and practices shape women's roles and experiences, often reinforcing patriarchal structures. The character of Huda provides a poignant example of how religious norms impact gender dynamics. Huda's struggle to reconcile her religious beliefs with her desire for intellectual and personal freedom underscores the tension between religious doctrines and women's autonomy: "Huda's conflict with religious expectations demonstrates how religious norms intersect with gender to impose restrictions on women's roles and aspirations. Her resistance involves navigating and challenging these religious constraints to assert her identity" (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 129). Huda's resistance includes questioning and critiquing religious practices that reinforce gender inequality, illustrating how religion can both support and challenge patriarchal control depending on its interpretation and application.

Ethnicity and cultural identity also intersect with gender, affecting the experiences of female characters in the novel. El Saadawi portrays how cultural expectations and ethnic identity shape the gender dynamics within different communities. For example, Aisha's experiences are influenced by her cultural background, which dictates specific gender roles and expectations. Her attempts to pursue a career and assert her personal goals are often met with resistance due to the cultural norms that prioritize traditional gender roles: "Aisha's struggle for self-fulfilment is compounded by the ethnic and cultural expectations placed upon her. Her resistance involves challenging both the patriarchal norms and the cultural expectations that restrict her opportunities" (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 148). Aisha's resistance highlights the intersection of gender and ethnicity, illustrating how cultural norms impact women's experiences and their strategies for asserting autonomy.

Access to education is another intersecting factor that significantly impacts the characters' experiences and resistance strategies. Education plays a crucial role in shaping women's opportunities and their ability to challenge patriarchal structures. Huda's secret pursuit of education represents a form of resistance against the gendered barriers to intellectual development. Her educational endeavours are constrained by societal norms that limit women's access to learning opportunities: "Huda's covert educational pursuits reflect the intersection of gender and educational access. Her resistance involves seeking knowledge despite the systemic barriers that attempt to restrict her intellectual growth" (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 136). Huda's determination to pursue education despite societal constraints demonstrates how educational access intersects with gender to influence women's resistance strategies.

Economic independence intersects with gender to affect women's autonomy and resistance strategies. The novel illustrates how economic dependency limits women's ability to challenge patriarchal norms and pursue personal goals. Nadia's economic struggles are a significant barrier to her resistance efforts. Her limited financial resources impact her ability to assert her autonomy and resist oppressive practices: "Nadia's economic dependency is a critical factor in her resistance. Her financial limitations restrict her ability to challenge societal norms and pursue her goals, demonstrating how economic factors intersect with gender to shape her resistance" (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 93). Nadia's experiences highlight the complex interplay between gender and economic factors, emphasizing the need for broader systemic changes to support women's resistance and empowerment.

The novel provides a nuanced exploration of how gender intersects with other social factors such as class, religion, ethnicity, education, and economic independence. These intersections shape the experiences and resistance strategies of female characters, revealing the complex ways in which various dimensions of identity impact their struggles against patriarchal oppression. By examining these intersections, El Saadawi highlights the need for a multifaceted approach to understanding and addressing gender inequality.

Furthermore, El Saadawi's narrative aligns with the broader framework of intersectionality introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw, who argues that understanding the multifaceted nature of oppression is crucial for effective feminist theory and practice. Crenshaw states, "Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). El Saadawi's work similarly emphasizes that addressing gender inequality requires acknowledging the intersections of various social identities and forms of oppression.

El Saadawi's exploration of intersectionality is also resonant with Patricia Hill Collins' concept of the "matrix of domination," which posits that oppression is structured along multiple axes that interact with one another. Collins explains, "The overarching matrix of domination houses multiple intersecting oppressions that include race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age" (Collins, 2000, p. 18). In *The Hidden Face of Eve*, El Saadawi captures this complexity by depicting how the female characters navigate and resist the intersecting pressures of their identities.

By examining these intersections, El Saadawi highlights the need for a multifaceted approach to understanding and addressing gender inequality. This perspective aligns with the views of Bell Hooks,



who emphasizes the importance of recognizing the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression: “Understanding the complexities of intersecting identities allows for a more nuanced approach to combating systems of domination and advancing social justice” (Hooks, 1984, p. 22). El Saadawi’s narrative thus contributes to a deeper understanding of the structural and systemic nature of gender oppression and the ways in which women resist and challenge these forces.

### Contemporary Relevance

*The Hidden Face of Eve* offers a profound critique of patriarchy and a nuanced exploration of resistance that remains strikingly relevant in contemporary contexts. The novel’s depiction of gender oppression and the strategies women use to resist it continue to resonate with current global feminist movements and contemporary gender issues, reflecting both persistent challenges and evolving strategies in the struggle for gender equality.

El Saadawi’s portrayal of patriarchy in *The Hidden Face of Eve* highlights systemic gender inequality that persists across various cultures and societies. The novel addresses practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM), domestic violence, and restrictive gender norms, issues that remain prevalent despite significant progress in gender equality. As Badran (2009) notes, “El Saadawi’s critique of gender-based violence and oppressive cultural practices remains relevant as these issues continue to affect women worldwide” (p. 120). The persistent nature of these challenges underscores the ongoing need for advocacy and reform in the fight against gender-based oppression.

The novel’s exploration of resistance strategies also underscores the importance of women’s agency in challenging patriarchal structures. El Saadawi illustrates various forms of resistance, from direct defiance to subversive acts and collective action. This depiction parallels contemporary feminist movements that emphasize women’s empowerment and autonomy. As Ahmed (2017) argues, “The novel’s depiction of women’s resistance, including direct defiance and collective action, resonates with modern feminist movements that emphasize grassroots activism and personal empowerment as crucial tools for combating systemic oppression” (p. 85). Contemporary movements such as #MeToo and #TimesUp echo these themes by highlighting the significance of women’s voices and collective action in addressing gender-based violence and discrimination.

El Saadawi’s nuanced depiction of intersectionality—where gender intersects with class, religion, ethnicity, and economic status—remains pertinent to contemporary feminist discourses that

emphasize inclusivity and intersectional analysis. The novel's exploration of how multiple social factors intersect to shape women's experiences of oppression reflects the current feminist focus on addressing diverse and intersecting forms of discrimination. As Crenshaw (1991) highlights, "El Saadawi's intersectional approach aligns with contemporary feminist frameworks that stress the importance of addressing intersecting forms of oppression to achieve comprehensive gender justice" (p. 124). This intersectional perspective is crucial for feminist movements that seek to address the multifaceted nature of inequality and advocate for a more inclusive approach to gender justice.

The role of cultural and artistic expression as a form of resistance, as depicted in *The Hidden Face of Eve*, is highly relevant today. El Saadawi illustrates how women use literature, art, and cultural expression to challenge patriarchal norms and assert their agency. As Said (2003) observes, "The novel's portrayal of women's use of cultural and artistic expression as a means of resistance highlights the enduring significance of creative practices in challenging gender norms and advocating for social change" (p. 72). Contemporary feminist art movements and literature that address gender issues reflect these themes, using creative expression as a powerful tool for activism and critique.

Finally, the themes of solidarity and collective action in El Saadawi's work resonate with current global feminist movements that emphasize cross-cultural solidarity and collaborative efforts to address gender inequalities. The novel's emphasis on collective action as a means of resisting systemic oppression aligns with contemporary global initiatives that advocate for international cooperation and solidarity. As Mohanty (2003) argues, "El Saadawi's depiction of women's collective action and solidarity reflects the global feminist movements that seek to address gender injustices through international collaboration and advocacy" (p. 98). Global initiatives such as the Feminist International underscore the importance of cooperative efforts in advancing gender justice.

In conclusion, Nawal El Saadawi's *The Hidden Face of Eve* remains highly relevant in contemporary discussions of gender inequality and feminist resistance. The novel's exploration of patriarchy, resistance strategies, intersectionality, and cultural expression provides valuable insights that resonate with current global feminist movements and ongoing gender issues. By examining these themes, El Saadawi's work continues to offer a profound critique of gender-based oppression and a compelling vision of women's resistance and empowerment.

## Conclusion

El Saadawi's *The Hidden Face of Eve* offers a profound exploration of patriarchy and resistance that continues to hold significant relevance in contemporary discussions of gender inequality and feminist theory. The novel's depiction of systemic gender oppression and the multifaceted resistance strategies employed by women provides valuable insights into the enduring nature of patriarchal structures and the diverse ways women navigate and challenge these constraints. Through its intersectional approach, El Saadawi's work highlights how gender oppression is compounded by other social factors such as class, religion, ethnicity, and economic status, offering a nuanced understanding of the complexities of gender-based discrimination.

The implications of El Saadawi's work for feminist literature and theory are substantial. The novel underscores the importance of intersectional analysis in feminist discourse, demonstrating how various dimensions of identity intersect to shape women's experiences and resistance strategies. This intersectional perspective challenges reductive views of gender oppression and emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to understanding and addressing gender inequality. El Saadawi's depiction of cultural and artistic expression as a form of resistance also reinforces the significance of creative practices in feminist activism, highlighting the role of literature and art in challenging patriarchal norms and advocating for social change.

For future research, several avenues warrant exploration. Scholars could further investigate how El Saadawi's themes resonate with contemporary feminist movements and their strategies for addressing gender-based oppression. Comparative studies examining similar resistance strategies in other cultural and historical contexts could provide additional insights into the global dimensions of gender resistance. Additionally, research could focus on the impact of cultural and artistic expressions in feminist activism, exploring how these forms of resistance contribute to broader social and political changes.

Overall, Nawal El Saadawi's *The Hidden Face of Eve* remains a crucial text for understanding the complexities of patriarchy and resistance. Its insights continue to inform and enrich feminist literature and theory, offering valuable perspectives on the ongoing struggle for gender justice and the diverse ways in which women assert their agency and challenge systemic oppression.

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