



HOW DO GENDERED POWER RELATIONS PRODUCE THE OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN IN *AL-ḤUBB FĪ ZAMĀN AL-NAFT*? A SARA MILLS CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Olivia Nurda Effendi^{[1]*}, Hetti Waluati Triana^[2], Reflinaldi^[3]

[1] [2] [3] Imam Bonjol State Islamic University, Padang, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the discursive construction of gender in Nawal El-Sa'dāwī's *Al-Ḥubb fī Zamān al-Naft* using Sara Mills' Critical Discourse Analysis. It examines how women are positioned as subjects and objects in the narrative and how such positioning reproduces patriarchal power relations. Using a qualitative critical approach, the data consist of narrative passages and dialogues from the original Arabic text collected through close reading. The analysis follows Miles and Huberman's framework, focusing on subject-object positioning and reader alignment in Sara Mills' model. The findings indicate that women are predominantly constructed as objects of narration, while their subjectivity remains limited and situational. Although female characters occasionally express awareness of oppression, this awareness does not develop into sustained narrative agency. Consequently, women's resistance is framed as reflective rather than transformative. The study also identifies symbolic violence through linguistic strategies that normalize restrictions on women's mobility, bodies, and socio-economic opportunities. Furthermore, the narrative positions readers to empathize with women's suffering while accepting gender inequality as a naturalized social condition. This study contributes to feminist literary criticism and critical linguistics by showing that gender inequality operates not only thematically but also through discursive mechanisms embedded in language and narrative structure within Arabic literary contexts and feminist ideological reproduction processes.

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*Corresponding author. Email: mrsone0412@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Departing from the still strengthening patriarchal system that structurally places women in subordinate and marginal positions in various aspects of life, both domestic and public, it always pays more attention to be examined in a structured manner. The dominance of patriarchy causes women to often experience injustice in the form of restrictions on economic access, loss of self-autonomy, and violation of stereotypes as weak and helpless creatures, thus inhibiting them from fighting for the rights they should have (Ayustin & Christin, 2022; Dewi & Tobing, 2025). In patriarchal social construction, the existence of women is often excluded (Asfufah et al., 2025), even when they demonstrate independence and personal capacity, such actions are instead perceived as deviations from socially and culturally embedded natures (Dankwa, 2018; Fujiati, 2016). The representation of these inequalities is not only present in social reality, but is also reproduced through literary works, one of which is in the novel *Al-Ḥubb fī Zamān al-Naḥḥ* by Nawal El-Sa'dāwī, which describes the practice of marginalization, subordination and discrimination against women in a patriarchal social system.

In fact, female sexuality in patriarchal societies is still under the control and domination of men, so women's bodies and desires are often used as objects of power and social regulation. In patriarchal structures, women do not have full autonomy over their bodies and sexuality because social and cultural norms place men as the party who has the right to determine the limits and sexual expression of women, which leads to gender-based practices of discrimination and oppression (Dewi & Tobing, 2025). Female sexuality is then constructed as something that must be controlled and limited, while male sexuality is normalized as natural and dominant, thus reinforcing gender power relations inequality (Babakhani, 2024; Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Hardt et al., 2022). Women's efforts at negotiating sovereignty over their bodies and sexuality are often viewed as deviating from the norms and natures that patriarchal cultures attach to them (Kelley, 2017; Martins & Campos, 2023). This social fact is represented in literary works as a reflection of social reality, so a critical study is needed to reveal how patriarchal discourse works in representing women and reproducing gender inequality.

Several previous studies have examined the representation of women and gender relations in literature, particularly regarding patriarchal discourse and gender injustice. In this context, the works of Nawal El-Sa'dāwī are widely used as objects of study because they consistently raise the issue of oppression of women. The study includes perspectives on feminism, literary sociology, and thematic analysis, especially in exposing the subordination and marginalization of women in patriarchal systems (Hendow, 2017; Nāmdārī et al., 2019; Naqdī Pūre et al., 2021). However, most of these studies still focus on the study of feminist literature and ideology, not yet touching on linguistic aspects critically. On the other hand, the application of Sara Mills' Critical Discourse Analysis has been used in reviewing other works by Nawal El-Sa'dāwī, such as *Zeina and Woman at Point Zero*, with emphasis on subject-object position, gender power relations, and the role of the reader in the text (Rarasati & Anshory, 2025; Suryaningsih & Sayuti, 2023). Until now, studies that specifically apply the Sara Mills model to the novel *Al-Ḥubb fī Zamān al-Naḥḥ* have not been found. Therefore, this study occupies a research gap by presenting an analysis of Sara Mills critical discourse to uncover the silencing of the subject and the objectification of women in the novel's gender representation.

By foregrounding gender equality as a central analytical concern, this article has a significant societal impact in fostering critical awareness of how patriarchal power relations are reproduced and legitimized through literary discourse. Through the application of Sara Mills' Critical Discourse Analysis, the study exposes the subtle linguistic strategies that silence women, position them as objects rather than subjects, and normalize gender-based asymmetries. This critical exposure encourages readers to question taken-for-granted narratives and to recognize literature as an influential site where social meanings and ideologies are constructed and circulated. Consequently, the article contributes to the cultivation of a more reflective and critically engaged readership that is sensitive to issues of gender injustice. In broader societal terms, such critical literacy has the potential to support emancipatory discourses, challenge discriminatory norms, and promote more equitable gender relations by reinforcing the role of language and narrative in shaping social consciousness.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method with a critical approach to uncover meanings and power relations embedded in literary texts. This approach is chosen because it enables in-depth interpretation of social representations through the analysis of language use and discursive structures (Yusuf, 2017, p. 329). The primary data source is Nawal El-Sa'dāwī's novel *Al-Ḥubb fī Zamān al-Naft* in its original Arabic version by <https://url-shortener.me/5SCP>, while secondary data consist of scholarly articles and news reports discussing the realities of women in the Middle East during the period 1950–2011. The research data comprise narrative passages and dialogues in the novel that contain representations of women. Data were collected using a close reading and note-taking technique, involving a comprehensive reading of the text and the identification of sections relevant to the research focus (Mahsun, 2017, pp. 92–93). This process yielded 128 initial data units, indicating a dominant tendency to position women as objects of narration.

This study employed a systematic and staged qualitative analytical procedure to ensure the depth and consistency of interpretation. The analysis followed the interactive qualitative data analysis model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Mezmir, 2020; Qomaruddin & Sa'diyah, 2024). At the data reduction stage, textual units were selected based on their contextual relevance and discursive significance, yielding 36 core data units: 12 instances positioning women as subjects and 24 instances positioning them as objects. These data were then examined using Sara Mills' Critical Discourse Analysis framework, focusing on the relational positioning of subject, object, and reader within the narrative. The analytical process involved aligning translated excerpts with the original Arabic text, identifying the discursive positions of female actors, coding the data, and interpreting patterns of representation. Each data unit was coded according to the form of utterance—dialogue (H) or narration (S)—and the positional status of women as subject (F) or object (M), along with a sequential number and source page, to maintain analytical rigor and methodological coherence.

RESULTS

Distribution of Subject and Object Positions in the Representation of Women

The analysis of *Al-Ḥubb fī Zamān al-Naḥḥ* reveals that the representation of women is predominantly constructed through discursive mechanisms of objectification. From the 128 initial data units identified as containing representations of women, a process of data reduction based on analytical relevance and contextual strength resulted in 36 core data units that were examined in depth using Sara Mills' Critical Discourse Analysis framework. Of these, 12 data units (33.3%) position women as subjects of narration, while 24 data units (66.7%) position women as objects of narration. This proportion indicates that women in the novel are more frequently positioned as those who are talked about, defined, and regulated by the narrative structure rather than as agents who possess authority to narrate their own experiences and realities.

The dominance of the object position demonstrates a systematic narrative pattern that reproduces patriarchal power relations, in which women's voices are weakened through the perspectives of the narrator and male characters. This distribution also shows that women's presence as subjects is sporadic and contextual, often emerging in moments of resistance, moral questioning, or heightened awareness, yet failing to develop into sustained narrative control. Structurally, therefore, the novel constructs an imbalance in representation between women as subjects and as objects as part of its broader discursive strategy.

Women as Subjects: Limited and Situational Subjectivity

In the data that position women as subjects, female characters are shown to gain limited space to speak, think, and question the conditions they experience. This positioning suggests that these actors play a meaningful role or exert an influence within the narrative (Rakhmasari, 2024). Women's subjectivity is articulated through narrative perspectives that allow female characters to express feelings of injustice, suffering, and a desire for liberation from social control. Nevertheless, this subject position is not fully emancipatory. Women remain confined within narrative boundaries governed by patriarchal ideological structures. The subjectivity that emerges tends to be reactive rather than proactive: women speak in response to oppression rather than acting as agents who fully determine the direction of the story.

Although women contribute actively to the text, they continue to experience inferior treatment through persistent stereotypes, as illustrated in data HF1-23:

Data HF1-23

“خرجت في إجازة و..”

“I requested leave and ...”

In data HF1-23 (Al-Sa'dawiy, 1993, p. 23), the main female character is positioned as a narrative subject because she can represent herself, as indicated using the verb *kharajtu* (خرجت). However, this subject position does not eliminate her status as an object of subordination due to the gender stereotypes attached to her. The superior's rejection of her leave request, as reflected in the utterance *lam nasma' hādha min qabl* (لم نسمع هذا من قبل) (Al-Sa'dawiy, 1993, p. 23), demonstrates the denial of women's right to leave despite the fulfillment of administrative procedures. This

condition corresponds to the social structure depicted in data SM13-5 “لم تكن النساء “تخرجن في إجازة. وان خرجت واحدة فهي تخرج لقضاء حاجة ضرورية. قبل الخروج لابد من تصريح مكتوب من زوجها، أو مختوم من رئيسها في العمل” which positions women as parties who must obtain permission from their husbands or superiors in order to take leave (Al-Sa’dawiy, 1993, p. 5). In this context, the mechanism of permission does not function as the fulfillment of rights but rather as an instrument of control over women’s bodies and time. Consequently, the prohibition of leave for women represents patriarchal practices operating in both domestic and public spheres, particularly within workplace power relations.

In several data units, women as subjects are portrayed as being aware of the unequal power relations they experience, especially in economic and domestic domains. This awareness is expressed through protests labor exploitation, the neglect of rights, and injustice within marital relations. However, such awareness is not followed by structural change within the narrative; women’s voices function more as markers of social critique than as drivers of transformation. Discursively, women’s subjectivity is constructed in a partial and fragmentary manner (Fikri et al., 2025). Women are granted space to speak, yet this space is not sufficiently strong to counterbalance the dominance of a masculine perspective that controls the plot and the overall meaning of the text. Thus, women as subjects are present, but they remain in a vulnerable and unstable position.

Women as Objects: Mechanisms of Objectification in the Narrative

The positioning of women as objects constitutes the dominant finding of this study. The objectification of women is enacted through various discursive strategies, including the silencing of women’s voices, the obscuring of their agency, and the placement of women as targets of others’ actions, decisions, and judgments. In many instances, women are depicted as experiencing events without having control over what happens to them. The narrative frequently adopts an external point of view that describes women’s conditions without incorporating their internal perspectives, rendering women passive entities whose existence is shaped by surrounding power relations. Objectification is also evident in representations of women in the economic sphere, where women work, contribute, and make sacrifices but are denied access to the outcomes of their labor. This economic disempowerment is reinforced by narrative patterns that normalize exploitation as a “natural” component of the social order.

Women are repeatedly positioned in marginal roles within the workplace, particularly in sectors of high value that are culturally associated with men. This condition is illustrated in data SM18-28/29 (Al-Sa’dawiy, 1993, p. 28–29), which depicts the rejection of the main female character when she applies to join the archaeological department.

Data SM18-28/29

رمقها رئيس القسم بعيون متسعة.

“هذا القسم إلا الذكور، فالعمل غير ملائم.. أعني حفر الأرض..”

This department accepts only men. The work we do (by which I mean digging the ground) is not suitable for you.

From Sara Mills’ perspective, the female character is positioned as an object of narration because she is not given space to represent herself, but is instead described

by the narrator, as indicated by the use of the pronoun *hā* (ها). Beyond being structurally objectified, “the woman” is also constructed as a passive subject within an unequal power relation. The statement “فالعامل غير ملائم... أعنى حفر الأرض... (fa-al-’amal gayr malā’im... a’nī ḥafr al-arḍ) reflects the department head’s judgment that such work is inappropriate for women. This judgment reinforces the restriction of women’s access to the public sphere based on gendered assumptions of incapacity. Through this representation, the author exposes discriminatory practices that deny women employment opportunities on the premise that certain professions are inherently male.

Women as objects are also portrayed within social relations that restrict mobility and freedom, as shown in data SM14-7 (Al-Sa’dawiy, 1993, p. 7):

Data SM14-7

“هل خرجت عن طاعتك في يوم من الأيام.”

“your wife ever left the house without your permission?”

The social rules depicted in the novel construct women as subjects who must remain under male permission and control, both in domestic and public spaces. The narrative not only portrays these restrictions but also reinforces them through normative language. Thus, the objectification of women in the novel is not incidental but systematic and embedded within the discursive structure. Women function not only as victims within the story but also as a medium through which patriarchal ideology is reproduced and legitimized.

Patterns of Symbolic Violence against Women

Women positioned as objects are represented through symbolic forms of restriction that limit their agency and participation in the public sphere, particularly within socio-political contexts, as illustrated in data SM102–130 (Al-Sa’dawiy, 1993, p. 130):

Data SM102–130

“أتقول السياسة؟! ألا تعرف أنه محظور على النسوة تعاطى السياسة؟”

“What did you say? ‘Politics?’ Don’t you know it’s forbidden for women to get involved in politics?”

The analysis further indicates that representations of women in the novel are permeated by symbolic violence. This violence does not always take a physical form but is realized through language, narrative strategies, and meaning structures that diminish women’s positions (Al-Sa’dawiy, 1993). Symbolic violence appears in portrayals of women as individuals who must accept their conditions without protest, as well as in diction that frames women as burdens, objects of surveillance, or subjects requiring control. The narrative language suggests that women’s powerlessness is a natural consequence of their gender. Moreover, symbolic violence operates through the normalization of inequality: discriminatory practices against women are not presented as deviations but as integral elements of an established social order. In this way, the novel’s discourse guides readers to perceive oppression as systemic and difficult to escape. Symbolic violence thus reinforces patriarchal dominance without

the need for explicit physical coercion, with language functioning as the primary instrument for instilling compliance and silencing women's potential resistance.

The Position of the Reader: The Construction of Ambiguous Empathy

The analysis of the reader's position shows that the text actively directs readers toward interpretive stances in understanding representations of women. Through the narrator's perspective and narrative structure, readers are encouraged to sympathize with women's suffering while simultaneously accepting women's limitations as conditions that are difficult to change. Readers are positioned as observers who witness injustice but are not consistently prompted to imagine structural alternatives. The empathy constructed is emotional rather than political (Rakhmasari, 2024). As a result, readers may comprehend women's suffering without being explicitly invited to question the systems that perpetuate it. This strategy produces ideological ambiguity: on the one hand, the novel opens space for critique of patriarchy; on the other, its discursive structure continues to preserve existing gender hierarchies. Readers are thus engaged in a complex process of meaning-making in which critique and ideological reproduction operate simultaneously.

Ideological Implications of the Representation of Women

Overall, the findings demonstrate that *Al-Ḥubb fī Zamān al-Naft* represents women within an ambivalent discursive framework. The novel functions as a form of social critique of patriarchy, yet this critique is articulated through a narrative structure that remains centered on dominant perspectives. Women are portrayed as figures who are aware of their oppression, but this awareness does not consistently translate into narrative authority. Consequently, women remain positioned as "those who are spoken about" (objects) rather than "those who speak" (subjects). These findings underscore the relevance of Sara Mills' Critical Discourse Analysis in uncovering subtle mechanisms of gender representation. By examining the positions of subject, object, and reader, it becomes evident that patriarchal ideology in the novel operates not only through what is told, but also through how the story is structured, narrated, and interpreted.

DISCUSSION

This discussion situates the research findings within the broader landscape of feminist literary studies and critical discourse analysis by emphasizing that *Al-Ḥubb fī Zamān al-Naft* does not merely represent gender injustice as a narrative theme but actively constructs it through systematic discursive mechanisms. The dominance of women's positioning as objects of narration demonstrates that patriarchal power relations operate latently within linguistic structures and narrative perspectives. This finding reinforces the core argument of social feminism, which conceptualizes women's subordination not as an individual condition but as the outcome of ideological structures repeatedly reproduced through cultural practices, including literature (Dankwa, 2018; Naqdī Pūre et al., 2021). Unlike previous studies that primarily interpret subordination because of social relations, this research demonstrates that such subordination is legitimized through discursive strategies that regulate who speaks, who is spoken about, and how readers are guided to interpret inequality.

Within this framework, the findings engage closely with [Hendow's \(2017\)](#) analysis of oil and women as entities similarly objectified and rendered invisible within petro-capitalist patriarchal systems. While Hendow emphasizes the politics of visibility (how women and oil are made visible or invisible according to the interests of power) this study shows that such invisibility is produced textually through the erasure of women's agency and the dominance of masculine narrative perspectives. Accordingly, the objectification of women in the novel is not merely symbolic but also linguistic. Women appear in the text, yet their presence is tightly regulated by narrative structures that limit access to voice, choice, and interpretive authority. This finding extends Hendow's petrofeminist discourse by demonstrating that the politics of invisibility operate at the micro-level of language.

Furthermore, the ambivalence of women's representation (marked by the presence of critical awareness without structural transformation) reflects the ideological tension identified by [Nāmdārī et al. \(2019\)](#) and [Torkī Nezhād et al. \(2022\)](#). These studies argue that El-Sa'dāwī's feminism often becomes entangled in a contradiction between critiquing patriarchy and reproducing the same social norms it seeks to challenge. Through Sara Mills' Critical Discourse Analysis, this study offers a more structural explanation for that contradiction: the limitation of women's resistance is not merely an ideological failure but a consequence of unstable subject positioning within discourse. Women are positioned as subjects only in specific situations (moments of crisis, internal conflict, or verbal resistance) without being granted sustained narrative control. As a result, women's consciousness remains fragmented and fails to develop into a discursive force capable of challenging dominant structures.

These findings also reinforce patterns of women's representation in other works by El-Sa'dāwī analyzed through Sara Mills' framework. Studies by [Rarasati & Anshory \(2025\)](#) on *Zeina* and by [Suryaningsih & Sayuti \(2023\)](#) on *Woman at Point Zero* demonstrate that women are frequently positioned as figures of resistance, yet such resistance emerges under extreme conditions, including violence, criminalization, or self-destruction. This study shows that in *Al-Ḥubb fī Zamān al-Naft*, even these extreme forms of resistance are preemptively weakened through narrative structures that predominantly position women as objects. In other words, whereas *Woman at Point Zero* presents resistance that is radical yet tragic, *Al-Ḥubb fī Zamān al-Naft* portrays resistance that is reflective but discursively constrained. This pattern confirms that discursive power plays a decisive role in determining whether women's resistance can be interpreted as a political act.

In addition, the symbolic violence identified in this study extends [Inuwa's \(2024\)](#) findings on misogynistic practices in El-Sa'dāwī's prison discourse. In this novel, symbolic violence does not manifest through explicit stigmatization, but through normative language that frames restrictions on women as rational and natural. Language functions as the primary instrument for normalizing surveillance over women's bodies, mobility, and choices, as also emphasized by [Fahs & McClelland \(2016\)](#) and [Fujiati \(2016\)](#) in their analyses of sexuality and patriarchal power. Consequently, women's objectification does not require overt physical coercion; compliance is produced through persuasive and hegemonic discourse.

The positioning of the reader further underscores the ideological complexity of the text. Readers are guided to sympathize with women's suffering yet are not consistently encouraged to question the social structures that sustain it. This pattern aligns with the findings of [Rakhmasari \(2024\)](#), [Defianty et al. \(2025\)](#), and [Mahsusi](#)

(2024), which show that many texts analyzed using Sara Mills' model cultivate emotional empathy without fostering transformative political consciousness. Readers are thus positioned as witnesses rather than critical subjects. This strategy reveals the ambivalence of the novel's critique of patriarchy: while the text opens space for awareness, it simultaneously forecloses the possibility of more radical social imagination.

Overall, this discussion confirms that *Al-Ḥubb fī Zamān al-Naft* represents women within a problematic and contradictory discursive framework. The novel functions as a critique of patriarchy, yet this critique is articulated through linguistic structures that continue to reproduce gender hierarchies. This is where the primary contribution of the present study lies: by applying Sara Mills' Critical Discourse Analysis, the research demonstrates that gender injustice in literary texts resides not only in narrative content, but in the ways, stories are constructed, distributed, and directed toward meaning making. These findings provide a crucial foundation for concluding that women's liberation in literature cannot be achieved merely through the representation of "conscious" female characters but requires a shift in discursive positioning that enables women to become full subjects in the production of meaning.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the representation of women in Nawal El-Sa'dāwī's *Al-Ḥubb fī Zamān al-Naft* is constructed through a discursive structure that simultaneously critiques and reproduces patriarchal ideology. Through Sara Mills' Critical Discourse Analysis, the study demonstrates that gender injustice does not reside solely in narrative content, but operates discursively through the configuration of subject, object, and reader positions. The dominance of women as objects of narration indicates that women's voices and agency are constrained within narrative boundaries determined by dominant perspectives, resulting in subjectivity that is limited, situational, and discontinuous, despite the presence of critical awareness of oppression. Theoretically, these findings underscore the importance of discursive positioning analysis in feminist literary studies, particularly for uncovering subtle mechanisms of silencing and objectification that operate through language. This research contributes to critical linguistics and gender studies in Arabic literature by demonstrating that women's liberation in literary texts cannot be sufficiently represented through conscious and reflective characters alone but requires a transformation of narrative structures that grant women full narrative authority as subjects. These implications open avenues for future research to examine more transformative and gender-just representational strategies in feminist literary works.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to this research initiative. The first author contributed to data collection, data analysis, and article writing. The second and third authors provided theoretical guidance, criticism, feedback and suggestions for the improvement of this article.

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AUTHORS’ SHORT BIODATA

Olivia Nurda Effendi is a student in the Department of Arabic Language and Literature, Faculty of Adab and Humanities, at Imam Bonjol State Islamic University, Padang. Her research cover the field of Arabic language and literature, especially the study of linguistic features, literary texts, and cultural contexts within Arabic studies.

Email: mrsone0412@gmail.com.

Hetti Waluati Triana is a professor in the Department of Arabic Language and Literature, Faculty of Adab and Humanities, at Imam Bonjol State Islamic University, Padang. Her research cover the field of linguistics, especially discourse analysis and pragmatics. Email: hettitriana@uinib.ac.id.

Reflinaldi is a lecturer in the Department of Arabic Language and Literature, Faculty of Adab and Humanities, at Imam Bonjol State Islamic University, Padang. His research focuses on linguistic studies, especially discourse analysis and pragmatics. Email: reflinaldi@uinib.ac.id.