



WOMEN'S STRUGGLE IN PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY: RELATION OF GENDER, SOCIAL, AND ECONOMY IN *NISWAH AL-SŪQ AL-'ATĪQ* BY MAJID SULAIMAN

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In contemporary Arabic literature, gender inequality and patriarchal structures remain underexplored in works written by men. While numerous studies have examined feminist themes in Arabic novels, few have investigated how male authors portray women's social positions through a sociological perspective. This study examines how Majid Sulaiman's *Niswah al-Sūq al-'Atīq* reflects patriarchal oppression and social realities in Arab society, utilizing Ian Watt's sociological framework of literature. This study employs qualitative descriptive methods through desk research, analyzing the novel's representation of socio-cultural realities, social structures, and gender dynamics. *Niswah al-Sūq al-'Atīq* serves as a data source and is analyzed using Watt's framework, which examines three dimensions: the author's social context, literature as a reflection of society, and the social function of literary works. This study analyzes key quotes from the novel, supported by news sources documenting similar cases. The research findings reveal that the female characters in *Niswah al-Sūq al-'Atīq* embody three interrelated dimensions of patriarchal oppression: economic inequality that traps families in a cycle of debt, gender norms that limit women's mobility and autonomy, and complex social relations in which the market simultaneously reinforces class hierarchies while enabling women's solidarity and resistance. These findings suggest that literature functions as a critical cultural document capable of exposing and challenging gender inequalities in the Middle Eastern context. This study contributes to gender-sensitive readings of Arabic fiction by demonstrating that Western literary sociological frameworks remain analytically productive when recontextualized in non-Western cultural contexts, while revealing how women exercise agency and resistance within patriarchal constraints.

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INTRODUCTION

Niswah al-Sūq al-'Atīq by Majid Sulaiman presents a comprehensive portrayal of women entangled in the social landscape of the traditional market, a seemingly vibrant and industrious public space that, however, is fundamentally shaped by a prevailing patriarchal framework (Sulaiman, 2020). The market is portrayed as a domain characterised by male-dominated power dynamics, wherein women are primarily relegated to the roles of unseen labourers, subjects of ethical examination, and emblems of familial honour. Female characters, including traders' wives, widows, single mothers, and informal workers, lead lives restricted by custom, poverty, and local political influences that determine who is permitted to speak and who must remain silent. They make considerable efforts to sustain their families' financial well-being, yet continue to be excluded from decision-making processes and social recognition. This work employs a nuanced narrative rich in emotional detail to elucidate the systemic functioning of patriarchy through language, traditions, and quotidian social interactions. The market serves as a metaphorical arena of power that subjugates, silences, and challenges the resilience of women, whose external compliance conceals subtle forms of resistance and the tenacity of their identities.

The gender disparity and patriarchal frameworks depicted in *Niswah al-Sūq al-'Atīq* are distinctive because the novel was authored by a male writer. This distinctiveness is a significant differentiation in light of the propensity of scholarly analyses of Arabic literature to prioritise feminist rhetoric in the writings of female authors (Abbasi et al., 2023; Kamal, 2019; Rashed, 2021). Nevertheless, the perspectives, frameworks, and representations of women's social standings, experiences of subjugation, and their capacity for agency within the patriarchal framework by male authors remain critically under-examined (Halaimia, 2025; Ithawi, 2025; Saikuddin & Amrullah, 2023). Comprehending this representation is crucial since literature serves as a cultural mirror that reflects social realities, power dynamics, and the ideological frameworks of the society from which the work originates (Caldeira, 2017; Ganguly, 2025; Machala, 2015). In this context, Majid Sulaiman's work presents a compelling perspective on the portrayal of patriarchal tyranny from a male viewpoint, while also offering an opportunity for contemplation on the intricacies of Arab women's experiences within a social environment characterized by control and inequality. This study seeks to address this deficiency by rigorously analysing the portrayal of women, patriarchy, and socioeconomic reality in *Niswah al-Sūq al-'Atīq* within the context of modern Arab literature and culture.

Contemporary research increasingly acknowledges the efficacy of sociological methodologies in literary analysis for exploring the connection between textual representation and social reality (Prasetyo & Wirajaya, 2025; Váňa, 2020; Váňa, 2021). The sociology of literature, as an analytical framework, amalgamates sociological and literary study to elucidate how books both reflect and shape social reality (Aminudin et al., 2024; Musgamy et al., 2020; Apriani et al., 2025). Ian Watt's sociological paradigm, which analyses the interplay between author, text, and society, has demonstrated analytical efficacy across various cultural contexts. Recent applications of Watt's theory in various cultural and linguistic contexts underscore its ongoing analytical significance beyond the Western paradigm (Watt, 1957). Syawaluddin et al. (2025) utilised this paradigm to examine social dimensions in the drama *Bait al-Asybach*, whilst Antika et al. (2025) investigated the social setting and values in Hamka's *In the Valley of Life*.

Additional research on Indonesian literature corroborates that Watt's framework remains analytically effective for analyzing how literary texts record and mirror social processes across various cultural traditions (Aisy et al., 2024; Hidayanti & Satriani, 2024; Kadir et al., 2025).

Moreover, researchers such as Fadilah et al. (2025) and Muhammad et al. (2022) have demonstrated that the sociology of literature serves as a conduit between textual analysis and social comprehension, underscoring its ongoing significance in contemporary global literary studies. Furthermore, Abbas (2025) and Ukhrawiyah & Munir (2019) have conducted a study on feminism that exemplifies the societal conditions faced by women as they strive for equal rights in communication and various aspects of life. Feminism is not opposed to tradition; instead, it critically engages with patriarchal structures to confront gender injustice while honouring regional religious and cultural traditions (Bakhshizadeh, 2023; Formichi, 2022; Msuya, 2019). Recent scholars have broadened the sociology of literature by applying it to diverse cultural and linguistic contexts, emphasising that a sociological approach is crucial for comprehending literature as a cultural artefact and a reflection of social dynamics.

The utilisation of Ian Watt's sociology of literature in Arabic fiction is notably restricted. Although researchers have thoroughly utilised this paradigm in Indonesian literature and gender-centric narratives in modern literature, there is a paucity of works that particularly investigate how Arab male authors construct and depict women's social realities and patriarchal ideology through literary forms. This gap is significant as the majority of gender-focused literary studies in the Arabic setting have concentrated solely on texts authored by women and feminist literary traditions. Sulaiman's *Niswah al-Sūq al-'Atīq*, situated in a conventional Arab marketplace and illustrating women manoeuvring through intricate social hierarchies dictated by gender, class, and economic precariousness, serves as an exemplary literary work to fill this academic need. The novel's emphasis on women's economic vulnerability, restricted mobility, and concurrent empowerment provides a fertile ground for analysing the functioning of patriarchal ideology within quotidian economic and social interactions, as well as how literature captures these dynamics with precision and emotional depth. This study will address the primary inquiry regarding the representation of women within the economic and social dynamics of *Niswah al-Sūq al-'Atīq*.

The novelty of this study lies in three interrelated contributions. Initially, it expands Western literary sociological frameworks into Arabic literary analysis, illustrating the sustained analytical efficacy of Watt's model when recontextualised inside non-Western cultural contexts (Omri, 2011). Watt's concepts, initially derived from English literature, become novel interpretive avenues when adapted to the Arabic socio-cultural context, demonstrating how Western theoretical frameworks, when carefully recontextualized, can yield new understandings of non-Western literary traditions (Yekani, 2021). Secondly, it enhances gender-sensitive interpretations of Arabic fiction by examining male-authored works, transcending the dominant academic emphasis on female-authored texts and providing novel insights into the construction, justification, and representation of patriarchal ideology in literature (Abbasi et al., 2023; Kamal, 2019; Salem, 2024). This study illustrates that male-authored writings can provide critical insights into patriarchal structures when analysed via a sociological lens, rather than being regarded as secondary to female-authored critiques of patriarchy. Third, it illustrates how literature concurrently chronicles oppression while facilitating women's resistance and solidarity, offering a nuanced comprehension of gender dynamics in Arabic literary representation that acknowledges both the limitations

imposed on women and their agency within those limitations (al-Natour, 2024; Ali & Al-Madaniy, 2023; Sevinç, 2021).

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive methodology grounded in a sociological perspective on literature. This paradigm is especially suitable for analysing the relationship between literary works and the social realities they depict (Choirina et al., 2024). The primary data source is the novel *Niswah al-Sūq al-'Atīq* by Majid Sulaiman (Sulaiman, 2020), which is available on the Noor Book website (<https://11nq.com/z4K6P>). The data collection employs a library research approach, which entails the systematic reading, recording, and classification of textual data pertinent to the research problem (Khofifah et al., 2025; Nurkanti et al., 2021). A qualitative descriptive analysis is the method used to analyze the data. This method draws on Ian Watt's literary sociology framework, which emphasizes three key analytical dimensions: the social background and position of the author, literature as a societal mirror, and the social function of literary works (Watt, 1957).

The data collection and analysis proceed through three systematic stages. *First*, the novel's content is read and analyzed to identify and document social issues, patriarchal structures, and gender dynamics represented in the text. *Second*, these identified social issues are described and contextualized by locating contemporary news sources, academic articles, and research that address similar social phenomena in Arab contexts, thereby establishing the novel's alignment with documented social realities. *Third*, findings from the novel's textual analysis, which are relevant to the identified social issues and corroborated by sources, are systematically organized, analyzed, and explained using Ian Watt's sociological literary framework. The use of this three-stage strategy ensures that the literary analysis remains grounded in the social reality that has been documented. This approach also enables the study to explain how the book operates as both a reflection of and a critical commentary on patriarchal structures and gender dynamics in Arab society.

RESULT

In *Niswah al-Sūq al-'Atīq*, Majid Sulaiman depicts middle-class Arab domestic life rooted in everyday marketplace experience. In this section, the novel is analysed using the sociological framework developed by Ian Watt. The focus is on analysing how the novel reflects the socioeconomic realities that exist in Arab society, particularly from the viewpoints of women. In this analysis, the focus is placed on three interrelated topics: economic inequality, marginalisation, solidarity, and social movement. The identification of these themes was accomplished by conducting an analysis of nine significant passages from the novel and then verifying them with six pertinent news sources that reflect contemporary Arab socioeconomic reality.

Women and Economic Inequality

In the context of the marketplace, Sulaiman sheds light on the ways in which women's interactions contribute to the emergence of economic inequality. The following excerpts provide a clear illustration of this point.

Excerpt 1 كنت اقف على بسطة فتون، وأخذ ما نقص على البيت من حاجيات، كل ذلك كان يتم بالدين، ولا شيء غير الدين. لقد خاط لي سعيد اليماني ثلاثة ثياب دفعة واحدة، كل في كل ثوب 85 ريالاً، طلبت منه تسجيلها في دفتر المديونيات حتى يعود البراء من غيابه، ويدفع له ما علي من مديونيات، وكل ذلك كان ديناً.

"I stood at Futoon's stall, buying household goods I lacked. It was all done on credit; there was no alternative but to borrow money. Said Al-Yamani had sewn three garments for me at once, each for 85 riyals. I asked him to record the debt in the accounts receivable book until Baraa returned from his trip and paid off everything I owed. These were all items I bought on credit."
(Sulaiman, 2020:23-24)

Sulaiman's portrayal of economic vulnerability in the novel illustrates the material circumstances of Arab working-class families. Excerpt 1 illustrates the dependence of household sustenance on debt mechanisms, as evidenced by intentional linguistic selection. The phrase *all done on credit*, coupled with *there was no other way than to borrow money*, conveys a sense of unavoidable economic necessity rather than a transient situation. The phrase *record the debt in the accounts receivable book* formalises what may seem like informal borrowing, thereby establishing a structured system of oversight. Sulaiman enumerates various household items sourced from different marketplaces, including tailors, grocers, and spice merchants, to illustrate that credit dependency is not an anomaly but a systemic feature; the entire marketplace economy functions through debt. This excerpt illustrates the structural economic conditions confronting working-class Arab women, wherein purchasing power is exclusively governed by male-controlled credit systems. This representation reflects macroeconomic data indicating that Saudi Arabian household debt averaged 26.09% from 1998 to 2024, with a projected increase to 35.3% by the end of 2024 (The Global Economy, 2025).

Excerpt 2 طلب البراء ثوبي الذهبي المطرز بالابيض، وبعد الحاح شديد منه ليخفف من سعر خياطته لثوبي، وافق مكرها، فقد اختطف اكثر من نصف قيمة جهده في خياطته واخرجه في حلتة البهية التي رآها.

"That day, Baraa ordered my gold dress with white embroidery, and after Baraa's insistence that Saeed lower his price, Saeed reluctantly agreed. This was despite Baraa having already cut his wages by more than half for the meticulous sewing work that required the beautiful finishes we saw." (Sulaiman, 2020:39)

Excerpt 2 illustrates economic exploitation as a calculated exertion of power, exemplified by the portrayal of coercive wage negotiation. The linguistic markers *insistence*, *reluctantly agreed*, and *cut his wages by more than half* illustrate the asymmetrical power dynamics between merchant and artisan. The term *insistence* implies a form of aggressive pressure, whereas *reluctantly agreed* highlights a lack of genuine consent. The reference to wages already reduced by over fifty percent for

meticulous sewing work illustrates how prevailing power hierarchies facilitate additional exploitation. Sulaiman characterizes this not as an atypical negotiation but as a standard practice within the social relations of the marketplace. This scene highlights the connection between economic dominance and social hierarchy, wherein affluent merchants exploit artisans through the utilisation of market power and previous wage reductions. Watt's framework illustrates literature's reflective function, as the novel records real wage disparities and labour exploitation highlighted in [Human Rights Watch \(2008\)](#), which details systematic wage reductions and power imbalances impacting vulnerable workers throughout the Arab region. The literary representation serves as a form of social documentation, illustrating structural patterns of economic control.

Excerpt 3 ...كانت السماء تمطر بعدها، فامضي ابكي تحت الماء الذي يخر من السقف، منتظرة ان يأمر الله الوابل بالوقوف، في وقت يمضي الذعر يركض سريعا في عظامي. اذكر يوم اختطفت نوبة عطاس ثقيلة انفاسي، والام وحى تصفق في جسدي، وانا انظر الى مضواي وهي تضع القدور ليتساقط الماء المتسرب من ثقب السقف، والمطر ينهمر بصوت صاح. اتذكر الان جيدا راحتها والشقوق التي برزت في خطوط يدها من التعب، واثار حمراء للجروح لم تلتئم.

"...then the sky started pouring rain, and I could only sit crying under the dripping water from the roof, hoping it would stop, while fear raced through my bones. I vividly remember one day when heavy coughing and sneezing left me breathless, my body wracked with fever and pain. I looked at Mudhowi, who was placing pots under the water dripping from the roof hole, while the rain poured down with a loud bang. I still vividly remember his palms, chapped from exhaustion, and the red scars on his hands that had not yet healed." (Sulaiman, 2020:29-30)

Excerpt 3 illustrates the physical consequences of poverty using vivid sensory imagery, including *chapped palms, red scars, fever and pain*, and *water dripping from the roof*. This linguistic approach transcends abstract economic analysis to represent economic inequality as tangible, rather than abstract, suffering. The meticulous focus on physical signs of labour, such as *chapped from exhaustion* and *scars...not yet healed*, illustrates the author's use of corporeal description to make economic precarity both visible and tangible. This deteriorating setting, marked by a leaking roof and inadequate shelter, serves as a representation of the tangible health implications associated with economic disparity. The protagonist's illness manifests within this context. When comparing the emotional collapse that can be observed in individuals sitting and crying with the physical symptoms that may be present, such as fever, cough, and pain, Sulaiman illustrates the psychosomatic effects of economic stress. He does this by contrasting the emotional breakdown with the bodily symptoms. According to a number of studies, economic abuse is linked to a worsening of health conditions and a dysfunctional relationship within the family ([Alsawalqa, 2020](#)). Sulaiman's literary depiction of economic precarity fulfils reflective and critical roles, capturing lived experiences and revealing structural injustices through emotional depth rather than numerical data.

Women and Marginalization

Sulaeman also depicts the unequal social status experienced by women. Women tend to experience marginalization, as illustrated in the following excerpts.

Excerpt 4 تلبية للبراء، الذي ادمنت حديثه عن المتبرجات من الكافرات حين يمضي في نعمتهم النعت الذي اضحى لصيق لسانه، وان علي الا اتشبه بهن في اللباس، فقد اقنعني ان البنطال حرام، والقمصان الضيقة حرام، واللباس القصير حرام، وخروجي معه بالنقاب حرام، ودخولي السوق بمفردي حرام، وعملي حرام، وسفري حرام، حتى اني كدت اصل بعد كل هذه القائمة الطويلة من المحرمات بان وجودي في الحياة حرام، وان الحياة لم تخلق لي.

"She constantly criticized them with phrases that stuck with her, and she convinced me that I should never imitate them in their dress. Long pants were forbidden. Tight shirts were forbidden. Short clothes were forbidden. Going out with her without a veil was forbidden. Going to the market alone was forbidden. Working was forbidden. Traveling was forbidden. To the point where, after this long list of things that were forbidden, I almost believed that my existence in this world was also forbidden. It was as if this life was not created for me." (Sulaiman, 2020:16)

Excerpt 4 documents the religious justification for control through deliberate linguistic repetition as a literary device. The word *forbidden* appears seven times in rapid succession: *pants are forbidden, tight shirts are forbidden, short clothes are forbidden, work is forbidden, travel is forbidden*, creating a cumulative, almost breathless rhetorical effect. This repetition is not incidental; it demonstrates how patriarchal ideology operates through linguistic saturation, making prohibition feel universal, inevitable, and exhaustive rather than contingent or negotiable. The structure moves from specific dress codes to mobility restrictions to labor prohibition, progressively narrowing the protagonist's conceptual space until she reaches the devastating conclusion: *It was as if this life was not created for me*. This linguistic progression reveals how systematic prohibitions accumulate to produce existential negation. The final statement represents the psychological internalization of patriarchal control; the ideology has become so thorough that the protagonist questions her right to exist. Through Watt's framework, this literary representation illustrates how patriarchal ideology is perpetuated through religious justification and linguistic control.

Excerpt 5 لا تخرج المرأة الا مرتين في العمر، الاولى من بيت اهلها الى بيت زوجها، والثانية من بيت زوجها الى المقبرة.

"A woman is only allowed to go out twice in her life: first, from her parents' house to her husband's house. Second, from her husband's house to the grave." (Sulaiman, 2020:17)

Excerpt 5 encapsulates patriarchal ideology most clearly in a proverb form, which grants it the authority of folk wisdom. The structure itself, *only allowed to go out twice*, reduces women's life trajectory to two moments of transfer between male guardians. The phrase *only allowed* emphasizes constraint and the granting of permission by male authority. Most strikingly, the equation of two life moments (marriage and death) suggests that women's existence between these poles is not truly life but mere duration. The use of *grave* as the final destination creates a horrifying parallel: from one male-dominated space (father's house) through another (husband's house) to oblivion. This representation in the novel aligns with documented restrictions on Saudi women's freedom of movement and public participation (Aldossari & Chaudhry, 2024), where persistent gender inequality and patriarchal norms create structural barriers to women's work and autonomy.

Excerpt 6 غياب البراء المستمر عن البيت اقلقنا نحن الاثنتين، ما عدنا نعرف كيف نزود بحاجياتنا، ولا استطعنا الخروج للتبضع بحكم قلة ذات اليد، فكلانا لا تعمل، والمال لا نكسبه، بل كان من مهام الرجل في حياتنا تلك الفترة.

"Baraa's constant absence from home worried us both. We no longer knew how to meet our needs. We were also unable to go out shopping due to limited funds, as neither of us worked, and earning money was the responsibility of the men in our lives at that time." (Sulaiman, 2020:68)

Excerpt 6 reveals the practical consequences of patriarchal restrictions: without Baraa's presence, women lack both financial resources and social permission to meet their needs. The key phrases, *unable to go out*, *limited funds*, and *neither of us worked*, demonstrate how economic dependence becomes a mechanism of control, leaving women vulnerable when a male breadwinner is unavailable. The resignation in *the responsibility of the men in our lives* reflects the naturalization of gendered economic relations, where women's economic helplessness appears inevitable rather than structured.

Excerpt 7 فنحن لم نرزق بالذرية، مع هذا لم اسأله يوما ايّنا اختاره الله عقيما، فهو مذ تزوجنا ينافح عن اهمية التعدد، وانه اصل في حياة المسلمين، وضرورة حتى وان كانت غير ملزمة لدى الكثيرين؛ لانه اقتداء بسنة اشرف الخلق، وليته برر بهذه الاباحة عدم انجابنا للذرية لكنك وجدت له عذرا بحجم البعير.

"We were not blessed with children, and even so, I never asked him which of us was destined by God to be infertile. Since we married, he has always talked about the importance of polygamy in Islam, that it is part of the Shari'a, that even though it is not obligatory for many, it is still the Sunnah of the Prophet. If only he had used this excuse of freedom of polygamy to cover up our childlessness, perhaps I would have forgiven him, even as much as a camel's forgiveness." (Sulaiman, 2020:29)

Excerpt 7 extends this analysis by showing how Baraa uses polygamy to exercise marital privilege while ignoring Islamic obligations of justice and fair treatment. The linguistic structure reveals selective interpretation: Baraa emphasizes *the importance of polygamy* and *the Sunnah of the Prophet* while conveniently omitting Quranic injunctions for just and equitable treatment. The wife's bitter irony, *even as much as a camel's forgiveness*, underscores her limited options and the profound nature of the betrayal. Women receive unequal financial support and emotional recognition despite being wives with equal conjugal rights. Over 100 polygamy-related cases filed in Kuwait document a similar pattern: husbands fail to provide financial and emotional support while exercising marital privileges (Kuwait Local, 2024), supported by research (Begum et al., 2024; Hasan et al., 2022) suggesting that the rise of polygamy in Muslim societies can be seen as a result of gender-biased patriarchal interpretations, not solely of religious texts themselves. Through Watt's analytical framework, these excerpts reveal the critical function of literature, highlighting how patriarchal ideology intersects with economic control to disadvantage women systematically.

Women, Solidarity, and Social Movement

In the various demanding situations they face, the women in *Niswah al-Sūq al-'Atīq* rally together and resist social constructs that disadvantage them. This phenomenon is captured in the following excerpts.

Excerpt 8 يا سعيد اخلاص علينا، تاخرت ثيابنا!
 "Oh, Saeed, hurry up! Our clothes have been delayed for a long time!" (Sulaiman, 2020:39)

Excerpt 8 depicts a hierarchical interaction between workers and consumers, where the imperious command *hurry up!* and the complaint about delays demonstrate customer dominance and worker subordination. The casual tone masks the power relationship: customers demand, workers comply. This reflects the real social dynamics of Arab market economies, where service relationships reinforce class hierarchies and the subordination of labor.

Excerpt 9 ظلت نفحات السوق الداخلي الباعث الوحيد لنسيان تعاسي مع البراء، فصرت ادخله
 قاصدة بسطة فتون، واجالسها بكثرة، حتى غدت مرتعا للفيف نسوة كثرات يجئنها
 واللاجات مدخل السوق الشمالي.
 "The smell of the market was the only relief from my misery with Baraa, so I would often go to Futoon's stall and spend a considerable amount of time sitting with her. Over time, her stall became a gathering place for a group of women from various corners who entered through the north door of the market."
 (Sulaiman, 2020:60)

Excerpt 9 reveals an alternative social function of the market. The linguistic shift is significant: from the market as a site of economic transaction and labor exploitation (excerpt 8), the narrative transforms the marketplace into a space of emotional refuge and collective resistance. The key phrase *only relief from my misery* identifies the market

not as a commercial space but as a sanctuary from domestic patriarchy. The protagonist's agency intensifies over time: she moves from occasional visits, *often go* to sustained presence, *considerable amount of time*, gradually transforming a public marketplace stall into what Sulaiman describes as a gathering place (a proto-feminist space of women's solidarity). The specification *through the north door of the market* suggests intentional entry into a women-centered zone, a deliberate navigation of marketplace geography toward community.

According to [Alizadeh et al. \(2024\)](#), women's public spaces have measurable positive impacts: enabling business networking, community interaction, and information exchange. The women's market in Mukalla, Yemen, documented by [Sky News Arabia \(2023\)](#), illustrates how markets have historically served as centers of women's economic participation and social connections. Thus, Sulaiman's literary representation captures both the hierarchical class dynamics of the market (excerpt 8) and its liberatory potential as a space where women exercise agency and build solidarity (excerpt 9). Rather than presenting the market as uniformly oppressive or liberatory, the novel demonstrates its contradictory character: simultaneously reproducing class hierarchies while enabling women's counter-hegemonic community formation.

DISCUSSION

This research demonstrates that Majid Sulaiman's *Niswah al-Sūq al-'Atīq* serves as both a documentary of Arab social reality and a critical intervention that exposes structural injustice. Through Ian Watt's sociological framework, the analysis reveals three interrelated dimensions: economic inequality embedded in debt mechanisms and wage exploitation, patriarchal ideology weaponizing religious interpretation to restrict women's agency, and the market as a contradictory social space simultaneously reproducing class hierarchies while enabling women's solidarity and resistance. These findings affirm that literature serves multiple social functions beyond aesthetic entertainment, functioning as moral education and social critique with affective intensity that quantitative data cannot convey.

Recent scholarship on gender in Arabic literature emphasizes how female authors challenge patriarchal narratives from external positions ([Aldossari & Chaudhry, 2024](#); [Saikuddin & Amrullah, 2023](#)). This study offers a different analytical entry: how a male author represents patriarchal structures within their own logic, exposing the ideological justification mechanisms rather than relying on external critique. Sulaiman documents internalized justifications, a perspective differing fundamentally from female-authored critiques. [Abbas \(2025\)](#) and [Ukhrawiyah & Munir \(2019\)](#) similarly note that literary analysis reveals how ideological structures construct selective cultural interpretations. Sulaiman's novel contributes nuance often absent from female-authored texts: women characters exercise agency and resistance within constraints ([Ali & Al-Madaniy, 2023](#)). Male-authored perspectives demonstrate that men's works yield critical insights into patriarchal ideology precisely because they may naturalize patriarchal assumptions while depicting their human costs and women's capacity to resist. The market's contradictory character reveals sophisticated complexity. Excerpt 8 depicts hierarchical labor relations that reinforce class hierarchies, reflecting the real Arab market economies. However, Excerpt 9 reveals an alternative function: the market as an emotional refuge enabling solidarity and a proto-feminist space. [Alizadeh et al. \(2024\)](#) confirm this dual function: women's public spaces enable business networking, community interaction, and information exchange.

Ian Watt's sociological framework remains analytically productive when applied to contemporary Arabic fiction, extending its theoretical reach beyond Western contexts. The framework successfully explains how an author's social position influences representation, how literary texts document social realities with specificity that extends beyond quantitative data, and how texts serve social functions beyond aesthetic experience. However, the application reveals a limitation: insufficient attention to how marginalized voices exercise agency and resistance within representation. *Niswah al-Sūq al-'Atīq* demands simultaneous attention to patriarchal constraints and women's resistance. Recent applications across diverse contexts (Antika et al., 2025; Fadilah et al., 2025; Prasetyo & Wirajaya, 2025; Syawaluddin et al., 2025) confirm Watt's analytical relevance beyond the Western context. As Omri (2011) and Yekani (2021) argue, adapting Western literary theory to Arabic socio-cultural contexts reveals new analytical dimensions, demonstrating how non-Western literary studies can creatively adapt theoretical frameworks and generate new interpretive possibilities, rather than subordinating non-Western texts to Western paradigms.

This study contributes to gender-sensitive reading of Arabic literature by demonstrating that male-authored works yield critical insights into patriarchal ideology when read carefully through sociological frameworks. Rather than focusing exclusively on women's texts, male-authored representations expose ideological mechanisms precisely because they may naturalize patriarchal assumptions while depicting their human costs and women's resistance. The study reaffirms the productivity of Western literary theoretical frameworks when recontextualized in non-Western settings, proving that the sociology of literature remains a vital methodology for understanding how literature both reflects and challenges social structures. By analyzing a contemporary Arabic novel through Watt's framework, this research intervenes in the scholarly tendency to treat literary sociology as historically specific to mid-twentieth-century English literature, demonstrating its continued relevance across linguistic, regional, and temporal boundaries. Literature functions as a social document capable of revealing structural inequalities with affective intensity and specificity that quantitative research alone cannot achieve, demonstrating literature's unique epistemological contribution to understanding gender representation and patriarchal structures in Arabic fiction.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that *Niswah al-Sūq al-'Atīq* functions not only as a work of fiction but also as a reflection of the social reality of Arab society. Using Ian Watt's sociological approach, this novel highlights three main interconnected aspects: economic inequality, manifested through debt mechanisms and wage exploitation; patriarchal ideology, which restricts women's agency and mobility through religious justification; and the market as a contradictory social space that simultaneously reproduces class hierarchies while enabling women's solidarity and resistance. These findings demonstrate that literature serves essential social functions beyond aesthetic entertainment, functioning as moral education, social critique, and awareness-raising that exposes structural injustices with affective intensity and specificity that quantitative data alone cannot achieve. The novel thus contributes to a broader understanding of how patriarchal structures operate in Arab societies and how women navigate, resist, and theorize their oppression within these constraints.

This study has several limitations. *First*, the analysis is limited to one literary text by a single author, thereby limiting its applicability to modern Arabic literature. A

comparison of male-and female-authored Arabic novels would reveal how different authorial viewpoints generate and critique patriarchal norms. *Second*, this study utilizes secondary data and textual analysis, which may overlook some contemporary social settings relevant to the novel. *Third*, Ian Watt's framework for Arabic fiction is analytically productive. However, it is limited to literary analysis. It does not account for other sociological approaches (such as feminist sociology or postcolonial theory) that may provide complementary insights into gender dynamics in Arabic literature. Research should expand this sociological method in numerous ways. *First*, applying Watt's framework to Arabic plays, poetry, and short stories would demonstrate the analytical efficacy of Western literary sociological frameworks in non-Western literary traditions. *Second*, combining Watt's paradigm with feminist literary criticism, postcolonial theory, or digital humanities may reveal new gender representations in Arabic literature. Future research in these areas will enrich literary sociology in non-Western contexts and deepen understanding of how Arab literature reflects and confronts patriarchal norms.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The first author was responsible for collecting data, designing and organizing the analysis, carrying out the research, and writing the text. The second author was also responsible for enriching contextual analysis and proofreading the work.

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