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## Challenging Eurocentric narratives: a postcolonial feminist analysis of the lives and experiences of Third World women

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**Abstract.** The ideas of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, a leading postcolonial feminist scholar, are explored. Attention is drawn to the criticism of Western feminist scholarship by postmodern and postcolonial feminists for its tendency to assume that the experiences of Third World women are universally and essentially same, ignoring the diversity and complexity of their lives. In an effort to better understand and give voice to the variety of experiences among Third World women, these feminists have sought to challenge misleading stereotypes that depict them as helpless, submissive, and oppressed. The importance of recognizing that the lives and experiences of Third World women are shaped by a multitude of factors, including cultural customs, language, history, education, family dynamics, societal values, religion, racial identity, social class, politics and economic status is emphasized. The novel *Women at Point Zero* is analyzed to illustrate how all these factors in combination play a role in defining the lives and experiences of Third World women. Through this analysis, Eurocentric narratives are challenged and their limitations are exposed. It is also shown how Firdaus, a character in the novel, opposes and subverts essentialist and stereotypical views of women from the global South as passive and oppressed.

**Keywords:** postmodern feminism, essentialism, stereotyping, intersectionality

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## Вызов европоцентристским нарративам: постколониальный феминистский анализ жизни и опыта женщин третьего мира

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**Аннотация.** Исследуются идеи Чандры Талпаде Моханти, ведущего постколониального ученого-феминистки. Обращается внимание на критику западной феминистской науки постмодернистскими и постколониальными феминистками за ее склонность предполагать, что опыт женщин третьего мира универсален и по существу одинаков, игнорируя разнообразие и сложность их жизни. Стремясь лучше понять и озвучить разнообразный опыт женщин третьего мира, эти феминистки стремились бросить вызов вводящим в заблуждение стереотипам, изображающим их беспомощными, покорными и угнетенными. Подчеркивается важность признания того, что жизнь и опыт женщин третьего мира формируются множеством факторов, включая культурные обычаи, язык, историю, образование, семейную динамику, социальные ценности, религию, расовую идентичность, социальный класс, политику и экономический статус. Проанализирован роман «Женщины в нулевой точке» с целью проиллюстрировать, как все эти факторы в совокупности играют роль в формировании жизни и опыта женщин третьего мира. Ставятся под сомнение европоцентристские нарративы и выявляются их недостатки, а также демонстрируется, как Фирдаус, главная героиня романа, бросает вызов и ниспровергает эссенциалистские и стереотипные представления о женщинах глобального Юга как о пассивных и угнетенных.

**Ключевые слова:** постмодернистский феминизм, эссенциализм, стереотипизация, интерсекциональность

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### Introduction

#### *East and West: the two binaries*

There is a long-standing misconception in Western societies that the East is inferior to the West and is primitive, illogical, aggressive, alien, fanatical, and barbaric. In fact, all these derogatory words are regularly used to disparage the East, fostering the idea that the West is superior and holds control in all areas,

including social, political, cultural, scientific, military, and economic fields. This belief in Western superiority is often reinforced through various forms of discourse, including history, literature, art, music, etc. In his seminal text *Orientalism* (1979), Edward Said, a Palestinian critic, asserts that “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (Said, 1979, p. 3). This dichotomy between the West and the East often presents the West as a modern, flowing territory and the East as a static, archaic region. Therefore, the Orient functions as a mirror to the West in that the West relies heavily on its counterpart, the Orient, for its own sense of superiority (Sandy, Ouardi, 2019, p. 129). On the other hand, this discourse of exoticism, essentialism, and stereotyping of the East and its people has been used to justify colonization, exploitation, and violence against Eastern civilizations.

The Knowledge production or the representation of the Orient in Western narratives is not a recent development; it has existed since the earliest times. Edward Said traces the development of this discourse back to ancient Greece, using two plays by Aeschylus as references. He reiterates that Asia in the play *The Persians* is portrayed as a ‘hostile other,’ a ‘world beyond the seas.’ In fact, colonists exploited literary works as propaganda weapons from the beginning to spread false images of the Orient. According to Said, “the ‘Orient was created – or, as I call it, ‘Orientalized’ – and to believe that such things happen simply as a necessity of the imagination is to be disingenuous... The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be ‘Oriental’ in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it could be – that is, submitted to being – made Oriental” (Said, 1979, pp. 5–6).

Said’s argument centers on the idea that the West’s portrayal of the Orient is heavily biased and serves to further its own dominance. Additionally, this euphoria of the West’s supremacy over the East is characterised by a tremendous power disparity, according to Said. He notes that the power imbalance between the West and the Orient allows for the creation of such universalized images that further reinforce this dominance. This power allows the West to shape how the Orient is perceived and represented and to create narratives that serve its interests. However, Said’s analysis does not explicitly address gender as a factor in constructing these narratives. This paper aims to build upon Said’s argument by examining the role of gender in how European discourse has portrayed women in colonized societies, specifically how the idea of rescuing and civilizing these women was used to justify and reinforce imperial power. By considering the intersection of gender and imperialism, this paper seeks to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the way that Western narratives have shaped and continue to shape the perception of the Orient.

## Discussion

### *Third World women in Western feminist discourse*

The term “Third World” was originally used during the Cold War era to refer to countries aligned with neither the capitalist or NATO First World nor with communist or Soviet Union Second World blocs. Over time, the term has, however, taken on a broader meaning and is now commonly used to describe developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. These countries are often characterised

by economic and social underdevelopment, political instability, limited access to education and healthcare, and high poverty rates. Despite its historical use, the term is now considered politically incorrect and potentially offensive as it implies a hierarchy of development and reinforces negative stereotypes about these regions of the world. This negative stereotyping of Third-World countries is also evident in the way Western feminists have portrayed Third-World women. Therefore, for this paper, the term “Third World women” will be used in the manner Western feminists employ it in their written works.

In the west, women left no stone unturned in the construction of the orientalist discourse, even though male scholars made up most of it. There is a ‘persistent trope’ in the West in general and Western feminism in particular, where Third-World women are frequently seen and stereotyped as helpless, submissive, dependent, and oppressive beings. In reality, Western feminists utilized the stereotypical image of women from third-world nations to contribute to the ideological project of the empire and promote the differences between Occidental and Oriental women, the primitive and the civilized, the spiritual and the rational, the weak and the powerful, while dressing up to rescue Third-World women from the plight of patriarchy and in their quest for liberation and development. They boasted about their own political rights and power while acting as agents of progress and enlightenment for Third-World women. According to Abu-Lughod (2002), “projects of saving other women depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority by Westerners, a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged” (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 789). However, even after donning the attire to rescue Third-World women, whom they saw as worse off than themselves, West women frequently “overstepped indigenous women’s subject position and sense of agency” (Syed, Ali, 2011, p. 352). Western feminists disregarded the effect of contextual factors on Third-World women. The women in the Third World have been portrayed and understood through the lens of Western feminists and viewers with no regard whatsoever and due consideration of local customs, culture, history, language, education, traditions, family, society, religion, race, and class, polity, and economy. They see Third-World women as a single, homogenous group with the same issues and requirements as women in the West. Moreover, they presumptively believe that all women across the world possess the same power and strength to fight against the implicit patriarchy and male-dominated culture they live in (Mahmoud, Sarhan, 2011, p. 35). The Third-World women, then, can be said to have been reduced in Western feminist narratives as beings who were enslaved, degraded, and in need of salvation and have remained silent figures like the Third World itself in their image creation in such Eurocentric narratives. In this case, Spivak (1999) writes, “if in contest of the colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (Spivak, 1999, p. 274).

In reaction to this absence and over-generalization by Western feminists, many Third-World feminists have worked to highlight the specific experiences and challenges women face in their own cultural and societal contexts and to resist the universalizing and essentializing tendencies of Western feminism. Some Third-World feminists have also sought to deconstruct how the concept of feminism has been postulated and understood within the Western feminist tradition and to challenge the assumptions and biases that have shaped this tradition. By doing so,

they have sought to create more inclusive and intersectional approaches to feminist thought and activism that are tuned to women's diverse experiences and needs worldwide. They aim to understand women's struggles in connection with historical, cultural, economic, religious, geographical and political settings, opposing the idea that women are one homogeneous, generic and victimized singular entity and an undifferentiated other. They reject the notion that Western women can speak for 'other' women without having experienced their life and culture. Moreover, they have adopted diverse strategies and methodologies to expose and challenge Eurocentric narratives.

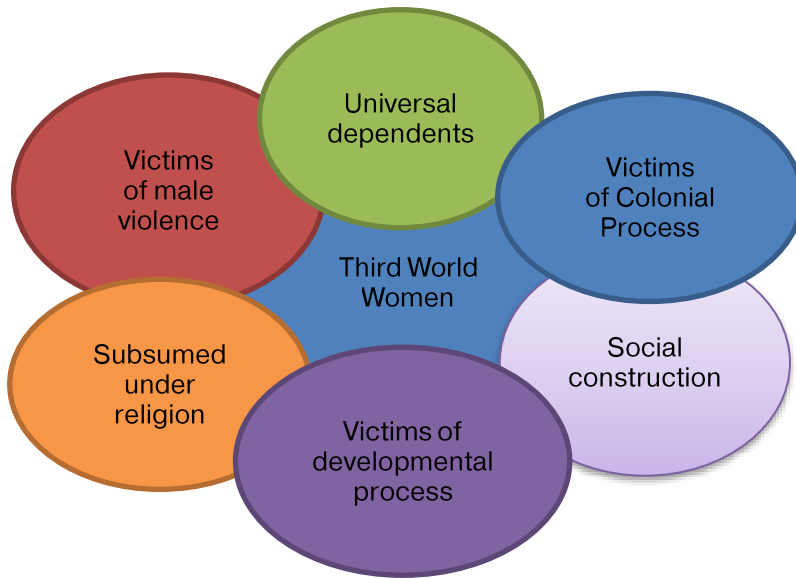
In light of the above, this paper aims to examine the role played by Western feminists in postcolonial endeavours aimed at liberating and supporting Third-World women, as addressed by Third-World feminists. It notes that one of the barriers to forging a common sisterhood is the difference in how they represent themselves and Third World women.

### ***Under Western eyes***

In "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (1984), Chandra Mohanty critiques the way in which Western feminist scholarship has historically approached the experiences and issues of women in non-Western cultures. Mohanty argues that this scholarship often essentializes and homogenizes the experiences of these women, reducing them to a monolithic and victimized group, and ignores the diversity and agency of these individuals. This homogenization is not based on "biological" factors but rather on "sociological and anthropological universals" that often treat women as a singular group due to the perceived "sameness of their oppression" (Mohanty, 2020, p. 65). By failing to consider the complexities and subtleties involved in these experiences adequately, Western feminist research creates a distorted and oversimplified "image of the average third-world woman" (Mohanty, 2020, p. 65).

In her analysis, Chandra Mohanty examines how the creation of a unitary, homogenized image of non-Western women in discourse serves to exercise orientalist power. According to Mohanty, this monolithic representation of non-Western women is contrasted with the "self-representation" of Western feminists, resulting in the erasure of non-Western women's "historical and political agency" (Liddle, Rai, 1998, p. 500). Western feminists are depicted as the true subjects" of this counter-history, while non-Western women are reduced to the "debilitating generality" of their "object" status (Mohanty, 2020, p. 79). The "average Third World woman" is portrayed as "ignorant, poor, uneducated, traditional, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, and victimized," while Western women are depicted as "educated, modern, and in control of their bodies and sexualities with the 'freedom' to make their own decisions" (Mohanty, 2020, p. 65). The construction of the Third world women as Other and oppressed beings thus implicitly demands from First world women to be their saviors and voices. Since she cannot save and represent herself in the vicious circle of oppression, she needs to be represented. Moreover, since these Third World women are "identical and interchangeable" therefore, "knowing one woman, what she needs, and how to fulfill those needs, is sufficient for the development expert to know and develop all other Third World women" (Wood, 2001, p. 431).

In her work, Mohanty identifies six dominant feminist discourses that contribute to the portrayal of “Third World women” as a unified and homogenous group. These discourses depict “Third World women” as victims of male violence, colonial oppression, family systems, development processes, and religious ideologies. These representations often position “Third World women” as passive and vulnerable, lacking agency and independence (Figure).



Six dominant feminist discourses

### ***Women as victims of male violence***

The portrayal of victimhood of women in Western feminist discourse often centers on sexual oppression and male violence, with issues such as female genital mutilation being frequently cited, particularly in African and Middle Eastern societies. While instances of male violence against women exist, reducing all “Third World women” to passive victims and all men to violent perpetrators fails to consider the complexities and specificities of individual societies and their systems of power. This oversimplification creates a homogenous group of women who are seen as solely suffering from male violence and a monolithic group of men who are seen as violent. Instead, it is essential to carefully analyze and understand male violence within these societies in order to work more effectively toward change. “Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged in concrete, historical and political practice and analysis” (Mohanty, 2020, p. 67).

### ***Women as universal dependents***

In this discussion, Mohanty highlights the common portrayal of Third World Women in Western scholarship as universal dependents in both political and economic terms. Mohanty cites the depiction of African, Vietnamese, and Black American women as examples of this generalization. This generalization often involves portraying these diverse groups as homogenous and suffering from the same forms of oppression due to their ethnicity, gender, and class. Mohanty argues that this approach assumes that men and women are already established as



“sexual-political subjects” prior to engaging in social relationships, and as a result, analyses of the impacts of factors such as “colonialism, labor organization, and kinship structures” on women are flawed. This is because these analyses are based on the assumption that women are already defined as a group due to shared dependencies, ultimately stemming from their “gender” (Mohanty, 2020, p. 68).

### ***Married women as victims of colonial process***

Western feminist scholars often depict married “Third World women,” such as Bemba women in Zambia, as uniform victims of colonialism. Mohanty criticizes this portrayal as being overly simplistic and lacking in nuance, as it fails to consider the agency and complexity of these women’s lived realities. Instead, Mohanty suggests that a more nuanced approach is needed, one that recognizes the ways in which power relations within kinship structures shape women’s experiences rather than treating them as passive subjects. This approach also acknowledges that women’s identities are not solely defined by their entry into marriage but rather by the various social structures in which they find themselves.

### ***Women and familial systems***

In this section, the author discusses how kinship structures, such as patriarchal families, may be used to define and construct women’s homogenizing roles and identities within a family and society. This scholarship of assuming a singular, cohesive kinship system that influences the socio-economic status of women is used to portray all Arab and Muslim societies while ignoring the particular “historical and ideological power structures” that shape these societies (Mohanty, 2020, p. 70). When speaking of the “patriarchal family or tribal kinship structure” as the origin of women’s “socio-economic status,” it is again to assume that women are “sexual-political subjects prior to their entry into the family” and thus, the methodology fails to account for the specific practices within the family that construct women as mothers, wives, sisters, etc. (Mohanty, 2020, p. 70). According to Mohanty, it is essential to consider the ways in which kinship structures are used as “ideological practices” that shape gender roles and relations rather than assuming a universal, static system that affects all women in the same way.

### ***Women and religious ideologies***

There are several limitations to the way that third-world women are often viewed as uniform victims of religion. This approach ignores these women’s unique experiences and identities and simplifies the role of religion, like Islam, to a single unified ideology. Instead, it is essential to recognize that religion, ideology, and economic factors intersect and influence women’s experiences in different societies in complex and diverse ways. This is something that Mohanty has pointed out as being particularly important to consider.

### ***Women and the development process***

Western feminist scholars often approach the development of Third World women through a narrow lens, assuming that “development” is synonymous with “economic development” or “economic progress” only. Perdita Huston, for exam-

ple, argues that development policies in countries like Egypt, Kenya, Sudan, Tunisia, Sri Lanka, and Mexico do not adequately address the needs of women, which she believes “centre around education and training, work and wages, access to health and other services, and political participation and legal rights” (Mohanty, 2020, p. 72). Huston suggests that these needs result from the lack of “sensitive development policies” that “exclude women as a group,” and she proposes that policies that prioritize “training for women field-workers, use women trainees, and encourage women’s cooperatives” would be more effective (Mohanty, 2020, p. 72). However, this approach to development again fails to consider the complexity of the interests and experiences of women from different social classes and cultures and can result in the “colonization of their specific experiences and political interests.” (Mohanty, 2020, p. 72) According to Mohanty, Huston’s representation of women in the Third World also lacks the acknowledgment of their agency, presenting them as having “needs and problems” but not “choices or the freedom to act” (Mohanty, 2020, p. 72).

Mohanty, therefore, critiques the “assumptions and implicit principles” (Mohanty, 2020, p. 72) underlying Western feminist scholarship on non-Western women and calls for a more inclusive approach that recognizes the agency and diversity of these women. She argues that this approach is informed by a colonial discourse that perpetuates the power dynamic between the West and the rest of the world, characterized by a lack of consideration for the specific histories and contexts of non-Western societies and an assumption of Western superiority. This approach is harmful as it reinforces power imbalances and fails to represent the experiences of non-Western women accurately. Mohanty highlights the challenges of constructing a homogenous group, emphasizing that oppression is always contextualized by history, ethnicity, and local social culture and cannot be equated with one another.

### **Case of Firdaus in novel *Women at Point Zero***

Nawal El Saadawi’s *Women at Point Zero* (1983) offers an opportunity to explore the portrayal of Firdaus, the central character, through the lens of Mohanty’s critique. The memoir presents a captivating and thought-provoking portrayal of its protagonist, Firdaus, whose identity and experiences are shaped by intersecting power systems, such as patriarchy, colonialism, religion, poverty and capitalism. Through this character, the memoir delves into the complexity and multifaceted nature of the intersecting themes of gender, oppression, violence, religion, race, and class, making it a valuable contribution to the ongoing research on intersectionality in the experiences of women. Rather than presenting Firdaus as a one-dimensional representative of all women in the global South, *Women at Point Zero* recognizes and emphasizes the individuality and distinctness of her life. The book deconstructs the notion of reductionism by illuminating the intricate interplay of various factors, such as personal history, interpersonal relationships, cultural and societal contexts, and religious beliefs, in shaping Firdaus’s life and experiences rather than attributing the entirety of the narrative to a single element.

Firdaus’ journey is one of resilience and determination in the face of overwhelming adversity. Despite facing sexual abuse, financial hardship, and domestic violence, she remains undaunted in her efforts to break free from the oppressive structures that seek to confine her. Through her actions, Firdaus resists the limi-



ting and dehumanizing expectations placed upon her by various agencies, demonstrating a formidable will to survive and thrive in the face of systemic injustice. In this way, Firdaus not only challenges and subverts the essentialist and stereotypical views of women from the global South as passive and oppressed but also serves as a beacon of hope and inspiration for others who may be struggling to find their own path to freedom and self-determination.

### **Female genital mutilation**

Female genital mutilation (FGM), also known as female circumcision, refers to the partial or complete removal of the external female genitalia for non-medical purposes. The practice is commonly found in areas of Africa and the Middle East and is often motivated by cultural, religious, or social beliefs. Western feminists have vociferously decried female genital mutilation, with Fran Hosken taking a particularly critical stance on the practice. However, Hosken's perspective on FGM is centred on the idea that it is a harmful, deliberate attempt to deprive women of "sexual pleasure and satisfaction" (Mohanty, 2020, 66). While this perspective is certainly valid, it is worth noting that there are many other factors at play when it comes to FGM, including historical, social, traditional, and religious considerations. Ignoring these broader aspects could lead to an incomplete understanding of the problem and potentially ineffective solutions.

The practice of genital mutilation is not simply a matter of gender inequality; a way of controlling women's sexuality and ensuring that they remain sexually passive and obedient to men. Instead, it is a deeply entrenched and complex issue often rooted in political power dynamics. Its continuation and perpetuation result from a broader social, cultural, and political control system. In the memoir, Firdaus poignantly illustrates the devastating impact of genital mutilation on her psyche, recounting the trauma and agony of the procedure during her youth and the ongoing physical and emotional suffering it has inflicted upon her. She recalls the brutal incident with great distress, recounting how her mother "bought a woman who was carrying a small knife or maybe a razor blade" to "cut off a piece of flesh from between her thighs," an act that left Firdaus inconsolable as she, "cried all night" (El Saadawi, 1983, p. 13). Firdaus elucidates the political and cultural traditions that undergird female genital mutilation. This pernicious and intrusive practice is often perpetuated under the pretext that it is a crucial rite of passage to attain the status of a 'respectable' and 'proper' woman. Conversely, those who do not undergo FGM are frequently 'ostracized' and 'marginalised' within their communities. She asserts this belief by stating that, "A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience" (El Saadawi, 1983, p. 44). The practice is a deeply ingrained aspect of collective experience that holds significant cultural, social, and economic value. It is considered a crucial element in the development and expression of womanhood and a source of 'pride' and 'honour' for families. Given the centrality of this practice to social identity within the community, it is understandable that Firdaus' parents would view her infibulation as a necessary step in preserving her perceived purity and, by extension, her value as a potential spouse in the marriage market. The scene is described in the memoir as

***Firdaus' Aunt to her Husband:** If my uncle (Sheikh Mahmoud) marries Firdaus she will have a good life with him, and he can find in her an obedient wife, who will serve him and relieve his loneliness.*

**Husband:** *Do you think Sheikh Mahmoud will welcome the idea?*

**Aunt:** *If I speak to him, I am sure he will agree. I intend to ask him for a big dowry.*

**Husband:** *How much?*

**Aunt:** *A hundred pounds or perhaps even two hundred if he has the money* (El Saadawi, 1983, pp. 36–37).

Therefore, due to the lack of agency and the stronghold of tradition, many girls come to view circumcision as a normal and necessary aspect of life, internalizing the justifications provided for its continuation (Althaus, 1997, p. 132). *Women at Point Zero*, thus, situates the practice of genital mutilation within the broader context of power dynamics and systemic oppression that significantly impact the life experiences of its protagonist, Firdaus.

### **Kinship and religious structures**

*...Every single man I did get to know filled me with but one desire: to lift my hand and bring it smashing down on his face. But because I am a woman, I have never had the courage to lift my hand. And because I am a prostitute, I hid my fear under the layers of make-up* (El Saadawi, 1983, p. 10).

The commonly held perception in the Western world is that Muslim societies are inherently patriarchal, with Muslim women facing oppression. The religion of Islam is often erroneously perceived as a patriarchal system that advocates for the subjugation of women. However, Moroccan feminist and sociologist Fatima Mernissi argues that this interpretation is based on a misunderstanding of the Quran and is actually a product of “cultural” and “historical” circumstances rather than an inherent aspect of Muslim societies or the religion itself. While it is true that some societies may exhibit a pervasive attitude of male superiority and female subservience,<sup>1</sup> it is problematic to make broad generalizations or stereotypes about the experiences of Muslim women or their religion. She asserts that “Islam isn’t patriarchal, but patriarchy has been heavily involved in the history of the middle east, and have subsequently seeped into the ways Muslims practice their faith.”<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, it is important to consider the way that this is not just a problem of religion but also of ‘power’ and ‘representation.’ One can see this as an act of violence that is not an aberration but rather an inevitable result of patriarchal systems, where men with religious authority, use it to maintain and justify power over others and this is not limited to Islam but a problem of how all religions can be manipulated in such ways. As Michel Foucault has astutely noted, power is not concentrated in the hands of a select few but rather is pervasive and operates through various institutions, including religion. Thus, it is not simply a question of religious doctrine but rather an intricate web of power relations that must be examined and dismantled to address this phenomenon. The character Firdaus in the text highlights this ideology through an encounter with her uncle’s wife, who reveals that her husband, a “respected sheikh well-versed in the teachings of reli-

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<sup>1</sup> Islam and patriarchy – and why it’s important to understand. 2015. Retrieved June 20, 2023, from <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/islam-and-patriarchy-and-why-its-important-to-unde/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

gion, often beats her.” Firdaus initially finds this difficult to reconcile, but the uncle’s wife clarifies that “men who are well-versed in their religion often use religious precepts as justification for such punishment” (El Saadawi, 1983, p. 44). This serves as a representation of Michel Foucault’s idea of “knowledge as power,” where men are utilizing religious knowledge as a means of domination.

Through the portrayal of a Firdaus’ journey in *Woman at Point Zero*, El Saadawi deconstructs the oversimplified and monolithic image of Arab and Muslim societies as strictly patriarchal, instead revealing the complex social and cultural practices that shape the identities and experiences of women in these societies. By delving into the historical and ideological power structures that have contributed to the portrayal of women in these cultures as oppressed, the work offers a more nuanced and comprehensive perspective on the realities of women’s lives in Arab and Muslim societies.

Firdaus, as a character, represents the fluid and multifaceted nature of personal identity. Through her encounters with a range of social structures, including family, religion, relationships with men, and the broader societal context, we see how her sense of self is constantly evolving and being shaped. While the institution of marriage may play a role in this process, it is not the sole determinant of Firdaus’s identity. Rather, the cumulative impact of all the different social structures she engages with ultimately shapes her sense of self and her place in the world.

Firdaus’ upbringing is indelibly shaped by the dynamics within her family first. Born into poverty and raised by a neglectful and abusive father, Firdaus suffered from trauma and instability during her childhood, which continued to impact her throughout her life. Furthermore, the submissive nature of her mother and the expectations placed on her daughters to follow traditional gender roles, with men as the dominant figures in the household and women as inferior and subservient, contribute to the perpetuation of these harmful dynamics. The maternal figure is expected to prioritize her spouse’s needs above her own and to support and service her husband and children rather than pursue her own aspirations and desires. The traditional family structures are used to reinforce the subordinate position of women. Firdaus narrates in the following manner: “*My father never went to bed without supper, no matter what happened. Sometimes when there was no food at home, we would all go to bed with empty stomachs. But he would never fail to have a meal. My mother would hide his food from us at the bottom of one of the holes in the oven. He would sit eating alone while we watched him*” (El Saadawi, 1983, pp. 18–19).

Firdaus’ relationships with men throughout the novel illustrate the power dynamics at play within kinship structures. She is frequently in positions of vulnerability and powerlessness in her relationships with men, who are often abusive and exploitative towards her. The arranged marriage between Firdaus and Sheikh Mahmoud illustrates the impact of kinship structures on the construction of gender roles and relationships within the family unit. In this society, the traditional kinship structure dictates that marriage serves as a means of achieving ‘economic’ and ‘social stability,’ with women expected to be submissive and obedient to their husbands. This reinforces traditional gender roles and power imbalances within the marriage, with Sheikh Mahmoud occupying a position of superiority and Firdaus expected to adhere to his expectations and wishes. This is illustrated in

the following lines spoken by Firdaus: “*On one occasion he (Sheikh Mahmoud) hit me all over with his shoe. My face and body became swollen and bruised. So, I left the house and went to my uncle. But my uncle told me that all husbands beat their wives and my uncle’s wife added that her husband often beat her... A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience*” (El Saadawi, 1983, p. 44)

From an early age, Firdaus and her siblings were at the mercy of their father and the other males in their family, who treated them as mere assets to be traded or sold for their own benefit. This is poignantly captured in her words: “My father, a poor peasant farmer, who could neither read nor write, knew very few things in life. How to grow crops, how to sell a buffalo poisoned by his enemy before it died, how to exchange his virgin daughter for a dowry when there was still time... (El Saadawi, 1983, p. 12). This behaviour illustrates the unfortunate reality of the subjugation of ‘female agency’ and ‘self-determination’ within familial dynamics while perpetuating the pernicious perception of women as mere commodities to be bartered and exchanged. Therefore, these power imbalances within kinship structures are used as “ideological practices” to reinforce traditional gender roles and inequalities, and they often serve to oppress and discriminate against women.

After being forced into marriage at a young age and enduring the subsequent subjugation and maltreatment inflicted by her spouse, the protagonist mustered the fortitude to break free from the shackles of domestic tyranny and seek her own autonomy. This courageous act, however, led her to a life of destitution and further exploitation as a prostitute. Firdaus’ physical being is utilized in a commoditized manner, with her being subjected to constant exploitation for the gain and satisfaction of others. Her existence is reduced to a mere object to be purchased and traded by individuals known as pimps, which obligate her to engage in sexual acts with various clients daily. Furthermore, she is frequently subjected to acts of physical violence as a means of coercion to comply with the whims of both her pimps and clients and is faced with punishment if she fails to do so. Firdaus narrates: “*Sharifa said to me one day, ‘Neither Bayoumi, nor any one of his cronies realized your worth, because you failed to value yourself highly enough. A man doesn’t know a woman’s value, Firdaus. She is the one who determines her value. The higher you price yourself, the more he will realise what you are relay worth, and be prepared to pay with the means at his disposal’*” (El Saadawi, 1983, p. 54).

*Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi thus challenges the stereotype of Arab and Muslim societies as inherently patriarchal by showing the complexities of social and cultural practices that shape the identities and experiences of women. The character of Firdaus represents the fluid and multifaceted nature of personal identity, shaped by a range of social structures, including family, religion, and societal context. The portrayal of patriarchal systems in the text highlights the manipulation of religion to justify power and domination.

### Conclusion

In *Woman at Point Zero*, the protagonist, Firdaus, is a powerful example of the complexities and nuances of the experiences of non-Western women. Through Firdaus’s story, the novel showcases the importance of an inclusive approach that recognizes the agency and diversity of non-Western women. This approach, as advo-

cated by feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty, considers the specific histories and contexts of their societies in order to represent their experiences accurately.

The novel reveals how Firdaus' experiences of oppression are deeply rooted in her specific historical, ethnic, and cultural context and cannot be fully understood or represented through a universalized idea of the 'oppression of women'. The reader comes to understand how societal structures such as labour division, class, and gender roles contribute to and perpetuate the oppression of non-Western women. It is important to consider these structures within their specific cultural contexts, as they can differ greatly from those found in Western societies.

It highlights the complexities and nuances of these experiences and makes it clear that a one-size-fits-all approach to understanding and representing the experiences of non-Western women is not sufficient.

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