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Representation of Women and Power Relations in the Novel Woman at Point Zero by Nawal El Saadawi: Sara Mills' Critical Discourse Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The study purpose was to examine the representation of women and power relations in Woman at Point Zero by Nawal El Saadawi using Sara Mills's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The study focuses on how women are represented, how subject–object positions are constructed, and how reader positioning is established within the narrative..

Materials and methods. his study employed a qualitative approach with a critical discourse analysis framework. The data source was the novel Woman at Point Zero, while the data consisted of dialogues, narratives, and discourse units reflecting women's representation, subject–object positioning, and reader positioning. Data were collected through documentation and close reading and analyzed using Sara Mills's CDA model.

Results. The findings indicate that women are represented through patriarchal discourses that position them as subordinate actors within family, marriage, work, and other social institutions. Initially, Firdaus is constructed as an object of domination whose identity and choices are defined by male authority and social norms. However, she gradually develops critical awareness and agency, transforming into a subject capable of interpreting and challenging her experiences. The analysis also reveals a shift in narrative authority from patriarchal voices to the female protagonist. In addition, the text strategically positions readers to identify with Firdaus and critically question gender inequality.

Conclusions. The novel portrays women not only as victims of patriarchy but also as agents of resistance who negotiate and challenge dominant power structures. The study demonstrates the transformation of female subjectivity from an object of patriarchy into a subject of resistance through discursive practices embedded in the narrative.

Keywords: women's representation; power relations; patriarchy; critical discourse analysis; Sara Mills.

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INTRODUCTION

Literary works are not just for aesthetic enjoyment; they also represent various social, cultural, and ideological realities. Through language, narrative, and character creation, literature reflects and critiques the social relations that shape human life, including gender relations (Eagleton, 2002; Kasanova et al., 2026; Wellek & Warren, 2014). In this context, novels can record women's experiences, reveal power dynamics, and expose inequalities that are often legitimised by social norms. Therefore, studying how women are represented in novels is important for understanding how their identities are constructed, negotiated, and positioned within social structures (Butler, 1990; Lazar, 2018).

Research on women in literature has grown with an increasing focus on gender issues, feminism, and power relations. Many studies have shown that women in literary texts are often portrayed from a patriarchal viewpoint, positioning them as subordinate, passive, and dependent on male authority (Beauvoir, 2011; Mills, 1995). These portrayals not only reflect social reality but can also perpetuate ideologies that support gender inequality (Wodak & Meyer, 2023). From a feminist perspective, literary texts are arenas where the meanings of women's identities, bodies, experiences, and social positions are contested (Ahmed, 2021). Thus, analysing women's representation requires a critical look at the power relations behind such discourses.

A novel that highlights women's experiences in a patriarchal system is Woman at Point Zero by Nawal El Saadawi. It tells the story of Firdaus, an Egyptian woman who faces various forms of oppression from her childhood to her adulthood. Domestic violence, sexual exploitation, social subordination, and legal injustice shape women's lives (El Saadawi, 2015). Through Firdaus' story, Nawal El Saadawi critiques the patriarchal social structure that treats women as objects of male domination and exploitation. This novel not only presents an individual woman's experience but also shows the social mechanisms that systematically reproduce gender inequality (Ashcroft et al., 2013; Moi, 2008).

To explore how women and power relations are depicted in texts, this study uses Sara Mills' model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Unlike other CDA approaches that focus on language structure and general social practices (Dijk, 2014; Fairclough, 2015), Mills specifically examines gender representation in texts (Mills, 1995). This approach examines how women and men are positioned in discourse, who is the subject of narration, who is the object, and how readers are guided to interpret and judge the characters. Thus, the Sara Mills model is suitable for analysing how women's experiences are portrayed and how patriarchal power relations are constructed through narrative strategies in the novel (Lazar, 2020; Mills, 1995).

Several previous studies have analysed the novel Woman at Point Zero from different perspectives. Andriana and Manaf (2022) indicate that the portrayal of women in literature often emphasises gender inequality shaped by discourse structure. Other studies examine female characters as symbols of resistance against patriarchal control and find that women's experiences in literary texts often serve as spaces for negotiating identity and power (Ahmed, 2021; Nurgiyantoro, 2021). Meanwhile, studies using Sara Mills's CDA approach have generally been applied to media texts, news, and literary works addressing women's issues (Andriana & Manaf, 2022; Wodak & Meyer, 2023). However, studies that specifically combine analyses of women's representation, subject–object positions, and reader positioning in the novel Woman at Point Zero using Sara Mills's perspective are still relatively few.

These limitations highlight a research gap that requires attention. Most past studies have focused on themes of feminism and gender injustice but have not fully explored the discursive mechanisms that create power relations in the text. By analysing subject–object positions and reader positioning, we can see how the text shapes women's experiences and guides the reader's interpretation (Lazar, 2020; Mills, 1995). This study aims to address this gap by examining how women and power relations are represented in the novel Perempuan di Titik Nol using Sara Mills's Critical Discourse Analysis model.

This study seeks to uncover how female representation and patriarchal power relations are constructed in Woman at Point Zero by Nawal El Saadawi. It does so by analysing female representation, subject–object position, and reader position in the text. Theoretically, this study aims to enhance Critical Discourse Analysis research based on feminism within literary studies (Fairclough, 2015; Wodak & Meyer, 2023). Practically, the study's findings are expected to aid the development of literary education and gender studies, especially in understanding how literary texts depict women's experiences and raise awareness of gender injustice in society.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach with Sara Mills model of critical discourse analysis (CDA). The qualitative approach was chosen because the research aims to interpret how women and power relations are represented through language in literature. Critical discourse analysis helps researchers uncover the representational practices, ideologies, and power relations behind a novel's narrative (Fairclough, 2010).

The research data source is the novel "Perempuan di Titik Nol" by Nawal El Saadawi, translated into Indonesian and published by the Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia. This novel was chosen because it clearly highlights women's experiences of subordination, marginalisation, violence, and exploitation in a patriarchal society. This study focuses on how women and power relations are

represented through the main character's narrative, dialogue between characters, and the author's storytelling strategies.

The units of analysis in this study included discourse units with representations of women, subject–object positions, and the reader's position. These units include dialogue, narration, monologues, character descriptions, and events showing the power relations between women and men in the novel. The research data are textual excerpts relevant to the study's focus.

Data were collected using documentation techniques and close reading. This process involves several stages. First, the researcher read the novel in its entirety to understand the plot, characters, and social context. Second, the researcher read the data again to identify sections with representations of women and power relations. Third, the data were coded and grouped into predetermined categories. Fourth, data irrelevant to the research focus were removed through data reduction.

Data analysis used Sara Mills' critical discourse analysis model, focusing on three main aspects. First, the representation of women looks at how women are constructed, depicted, and interpreted in the text. Second, the subject–object position examines how female and male characters are positioned as narrators or subjects within the discourse. Third, the reader's position considers how the text guides readers to understand, evaluate, and respond to the experiences of female characters. The analysis was interpretive, examining the relationship between language choices, narrative structure, and gender ideology in the text (Mills, 1995).

The data analysis process consisted of four stages. The first stage involved identifying data based on female representation, subject–object position, and reader position. The second stage involved reducing the data by selecting the most relevant quotations for the research objectives. The third stage involved interpreting the data using Sara Mills's perspective to uncover the power relations in the text. The fourth stage involved drawing conclusions based on the patterns of representation and gender construction. Data validity was ensured through theoretical triangulation by comparing research findings using Sara Mills's Critical Discourse Analysis with the concepts of power relations, patriarchy, and gender representation from feminist studies and critical discourse analysis. Additionally, the researcher used persistent observation by repeatedly reading the text to ensure consistent interpretation and relevance of the analysed data.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Representation of Women in the Construction of Patriarchy

The analysis results show that women in the novel "Woman at Point Zero" are depicted through patriarchal constructs that make them subordinate in various social areas. This is clear from Firdaus's life experiences, where she faces restrictions, violence, exploitation, and marginalisation by men and social institutions supporting patriarchal domination.

At the beginning of the story, women are shown through gender stereotypes linking them to gentleness, passivity, and powerlessness. Firdaus is portrayed as physically weak and incapable of committing violence. This suggests that female identity is shaped by the social assumptions of a patriarchal society. Women are judged based on an ideal image imposed on them, rather than their actual experiences.

From a feminist perspective, this representation shows how women are constructed as the Other, with identities defined by male standards (Beauvoir, 2011). Women are not seen as autonomous subjects but as objects defined by the dominant social norms. These findings support Mills's (1995) argument that women's representation in texts is part of discursive practices that reproduce gendered power relations.

However, the representation of women in the novel changes significantly. As the story progresses, Firdaus becomes increasingly aware of the injustices she faces. Experiences of violence in the family, marriage, and workplace lead to a critical understanding of the system controlling their lives. At this point, women are not just victims but also individuals who recognise the oppressive structures around them.

These changes show that the novel not only tells a story of women's suffering but also depicts a process of consciousness transformation that allows women to resist patriarchal domination. Thus, the representation of women in the novel shifts from subordination to a more autonomous identity.

Subject–Object Position and the Reproduction of Power Relations

An analysis of the subject–object position shows that power relations in the novel are built through narrative techniques that place women and men in different roles. At the beginning of the story, she often appears as an object in the narrative. Her identity and existence are described through the views of other characters with social authority, primarily men.

This position shows that women face subordination not only in social life but also in narrative representations. Firdaus is portrayed as someone who is discussed, judged, and explained by others. According to Sara Mills' (1995) framework, this position shows how women are often placed as objects of discourse without the power to define themselves. A significant change occurs when Firdaus begins telling her life story from a first-person perspective. At this point, the narrative authority shifts to the female character. Firdaus is no longer an object explained by others; she becomes the subject who explains her own experiences and realities.

However, Firdaus's narrative reveals the strength of the patriarchal structure that positions women as objects of power. Fathers, husbands, clients, and legal institutions act as forces that control women's bodies, choices, and futures. In other words, changes in narrative position do not automatically remove women's subordinate position within the social structure. These findings show that the power relations in the novel are dynamic. Firdaus gradually reclaims authority over her life through storytelling. From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, the ability to narrate oneself is a form of symbolic power that allows women to create alternative meanings of a reality long defined by the patriarchal system (Fairclough, 2015). Thus, the subject–object position in the novel serves not only as a narrative strategy but also as a space for power contestation. Firdaus's shift from object to subject illustrates a process of negotiation that enables women to regain control over their identities and life experiences.

Reader Position and the Construction of Critical Consciousness

Research findings show that the novel shapes the reader's view using narrative techniques that let the reader see the world from the perspective of Firdaus. Through autobiographical narration, personal experience, and emotional reflection, the novel creates a bond between the reader and the main character, helping the reader understand the experiences of women in a patriarchal society. According to Mills (2003), the reader's position is not neutral. The text guides the reader to adopt a specific view of reality. In this novel, the reader is led to see that the violence Firdaus faces is not just an isolated incident but part of a larger social system.

Through this identification process, readers are encouraged to sympathise with Firdaus and question the legitimacy of social institutions that have long been considered normal. Family, marriage, religion, and law are shown as institutions that can perpetuate gender inequality in certain situations. As a result, readers are led to critically examine social norms that were previously accepted without question by them. These findings suggest that the novel's ideological role is not only in showing women's experiences but also in raising readers' critical awareness of the power dynamics in society. Thus, the reader's position becomes a key part of the meaning and social critique the text offers.

Discussion

Research findings show that power dynamics in the novel "Woman at Point Zero" are created by representing women as subordinate yet allowing room for resistance. Firdaus transforms from a patriarchal object to a subject with critical awareness and self-definition. These findings support Mills's (2003) idea that the subject-object position in the text is a site of ideological negotiation that shapes women's identities. Initially, Firdaus is dominated by family, marriage, and patriarchal structures. However, her repeated oppression leads to a critical awareness that fuels her resistance. This aligns with Ahmed's (2021) concept of feminist consciousness, in which women recognise and reject gender injustice. This awareness allows Firdaus to reclaim control over her body, her identity, and her life. Resistance is seen not only in social actions but also in her ability to narrate and define her self.

These findings also support Butler's (1990) view that gender identity is not fixed but is shaped and negotiated through language, social practices, and power dynamics. Firdaus does not just accept

the female identity given by a patriarchal society but gradually builds an alternative identity that rejects subordination. Thus, the study's main contribution is showing that women in the novel are not only victims of patriarchy but also subjects who can negotiate and change their positions within an oppressive structure. The novel "Perempuan di Titik Nol" not only critiques patriarchy but also shows the possibility of autonomous female subjectivity through awareness and resistance to dominant power relations.

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that in the novel "Women at Point Zero", Nawal El Saadawi portrays women through patriarchal power dynamics that make them subordinate in family, marriage, work, and other social settings. Using Sara Mills's Critical Discourse Analysis, it was discovered that women are depicted not only as subjects of male control but also as undergoing a transformation that leads to awareness and resistance against oppression. The findings reveal that Firdaus transitions from being an object of patriarchal discourse to a subject of resistance discourse by understanding, critiquing, and redefining her life's experiences. Regarding the subject-object position, the study finds that power dynamics in the novel are built through narrative techniques that gradually shift Firdaus from an object defined by others to a subject with control over her story. Additionally, the text encourages readers to emotionally and ideologically identify with marginalised women, prompting them to view social realities from their perspective. Thus, the novel depicts women's experiences and critiques the patriarchal structure that perpetuates gender inequality.

Theoretically, this study supports the importance of Sara Mills's Critical Discourse Analysis model in exploring the link between gender representation, power dynamics, and the formation of women's subjectivity in literature. These findings expand the understanding that women in literary texts are not always passive victims but can become subjects who actively challenge patriarchal control through discourse. Therefore, this study contributes to literary feminist studies and gender-based critical discourse analysis. Practically, the research results can be used in university literature teaching to enhance students' critical literacy regarding gender issues, women's representation, and power dynamics in literary texts. The analysis of the novel "Perempuan di Titik Nol" can also help raise awareness of the importance of gender equality and respect for women's rights in society. This study is limited to the analysis of a single literary work using Sara Mills's perspective. Future research could explore literary works from different cultures or combine Mills's perspective with contemporary feminist approaches, postcolonial feminism, or multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis for a more comprehensive understanding of women's representation and power dynamics in various cultural texts.

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