

## Gender, Culture and Power in African and Middle Eastern Works

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### *Abstract*

*This paper explores the intricate social, political, and cultural issues in African and Middle Eastern literature through the works of Fatima Mernissi (Teras Terlarang), Ibrahim Fawal (My Salwa My Palestine), and Carmen bin Laden (Inside the Kingdom). It examines the intersection of gender, power, and identity within socio-political contexts shaped by historical struggles, patriarchal norms, and cultural expectations. The study aims to analyze how these literary works portray both personal and collective resistance against oppression while reflecting broader societal conflicts. Employing a qualitative literary analysis method, it focuses on textual interpretation and thematic exploration. Data is gathered through close reading of the selected texts, supported by secondary sources on feminist, postcolonial, and cultural theories. The analysis uncovers recurring themes of identity negotiation, resistance to patriarchal and colonial structures, and the pursuit of personal freedom within restrictive cultural environments. It highlights how literature serves as a platform for addressing sensitive socio-political issues while advocating for change. Ultimately, the study concludes that these narratives extend beyond individual struggles, offering valuable insights into the broader discourse on human rights and justice in the Islamic world. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of gender, culture, and political complexity in contemporary literature.*

**Keywords:** *Culture, Gender, Identity, Literature, Politics.*

### **A. Introduction**

The complex intersection of culture, gender, and identity in African and Middle Eastern literature reflects a long history of socio-political struggles deeply intertwined with colonialism, patriarchy, and evolving cultural norms. This paper explores these themes through the works of Fatima Mernissi (*Teras Terlarang*), Ibrahim Fawal (*My Salwa My Palestine*), and Carmen bin Laden (*Inside the Kingdom*). It examines how these authors portray the struggles of individuals and societies within cultures shaped by colonial legacies, patriarchal systems, and political oppression. Each work presents personal narratives of resistance set against broader socio-political landscapes, influencing characters' identities and actions.

This study seeks to understand how these authors address complex socio-cultural issues, particularly the intersection of gender, culture, and identity in the Islamic world and the broader

Middle Eastern and North African contexts. Literature from these regions frequently grapples with modernity, colonial influence, and the pursuit of autonomy within traditionally restrictive societies. By analyzing these texts, this research aims to uncover how these narratives reflect struggles for personal freedom and social justice while challenging historical and cultural limitations—especially those imposed on women.

The primary objective of this study is to analyze how gender and power relations are portrayed in the selected works and to explore their contributions to broader conversations on resistance, identity, and cultural preservation in postcolonial societies. Additionally, this paper examines how literature functions as a form of political and social resistance, providing a platform for marginalized voices to challenge dominant cultural narratives.

To guide this analysis, postcolonial feminist theory serves as the primary theoretical framework. Scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak emphasize the intersection of gender and colonialism, particularly in societies where patriarchal structures are reinforced by colonial histories. Edward Said's theory of Orientalism further informs this study by examining how Western narratives have historically marginalized indigenous voices and shaped perceptions of the East. Through this critical lens, the research explores how Mernissi, Fawal, and bin Laden engage with external and internal forces that shape their characters' lives.

Additionally, Michel Foucault's concepts of power and resistance provide valuable insights into how these authors depict individual struggles against oppressive structures. Foucault's notion of power as not merely top-down but embedded in everyday practices helps illuminate the subtle ways characters resist societal norms, often challenging the status quo without overt confrontation. This theoretical perspective informs the analysis of characters' actions, the spaces they inhabit, and the ways they navigate their identities in relation to dominant cultural forces.

Ultimately, this paper seeks to answer the question: How do the works of Mernissi, Fawal, and bin Laden illustrate the complexities of gender, identity, and power in African and Middle Eastern societies? By employing feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, this study demonstrates how these authors' narratives offer nuanced critiques of colonialism, patriarchy, and socio-political constraints, contributing to a broader discourse on human rights, gender equality, and cultural identity in the contemporary Islamic world.

## **B. Method**

This research employs a qualitative literary analysis approach, focusing on an in-depth exploration of thematic elements, character development, and narrative structures within the selected literary works: *Teras Terlarang* by Fatima Mernissi, *My Salwa My Palestine* by Ibrahim Fawal, and *Inside the Kingdom* by Carmen bin Laden. The study aims to examine how these works address the complexities of gender, identity, and socio-political power in African and Middle Eastern societies, particularly through the lens of postcolonial feminism and critical cultural theories. This qualitative approach enables a detailed interpretation of the texts, highlighting the nuanced ways in which literature engages with political, cultural, and gender-related issues.

Data collection involves close reading and textual analysis of the three selected literary works. Primary data is drawn directly from these texts, focusing on key themes such as gender dynamics, identity formation, resistance, and the representation of social and political struggles. Secondary data is obtained from scholarly articles, books, and academic journals that provide insights into postcolonial feminism, cultural identity, and the socio-political contexts of the Middle East and North Africa. These secondary sources help situate the literary works within broader theoretical and historical discourses.

The study relies on both textual and theoretical data. Primary data consists of the literary texts themselves, with an emphasis on thematic and narrative content, including character interactions, plot development, symbols, and metaphors used to address issues of gender, power, and identity. Secondary data includes theoretical and scholarly sources that offer critical frameworks for analyzing the primary texts, particularly in relation to feminist theory, postcolonial discourse, and cultural studies. The integration of primary and secondary data allows for a comprehensive and nuanced analysis.

Data analysis is conducted through a feminist and postcolonial lens, employing critical literary approaches to examine how each text portrays gender relations, colonial histories, and cultural identity. Feminist theory is applied to explore the representation of women's agency, resistance, and empowerment within the narratives. Postcolonial theory, particularly the works of Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha, is used to analyze representations of colonialism and its enduring effects. Additionally, Michel Foucault's concepts of power and resistance inform the analysis by exploring how characters navigate their identities and challenge societal norms in restrictive cultural and political environments.

By identifying the intersection of these themes, this research contributes to broader discussions on gender, power, and identity within postcolonial literature. The findings aim to enhance the understanding of how literature from African and Middle Eastern contexts serves as a medium for social critique and political resistance, offering valuable perspectives on the lived experiences of individuals within these regions.

## **C. Findings and Discussion**

### **Finding**

The analysis of *Teras Terlarang* by Fatima Mernissi, *My Salwa My Palestine* by Ibrahim Fawal, and *Inside the Kingdom* by Carmen bin Laden reveals recurring thematic patterns in the representation of gender, power, and identity within the socio-political landscapes of the Middle East and North Africa. Through close reading, several significant findings emerge:

#### **1. Representation of Gender Dynamics**

Each of these works portrays the struggles of women navigating patriarchal societies, where they assert their agency despite systemic oppression. In *Teras Terlarang*, Mernissi explores the theme of resistance against traditional gender roles, using the harem as both a literal space of confinement and a metaphor for female empowerment. Fawal's *My Salwa My Palestine* highlights the intersection of gender and nationalism, depicting women as active participants in the resistance movement against colonial rule while simultaneously challenging patriarchal norms. Similarly, *Inside the Kingdom* offers a deeply personal account of the restrictions placed on women in Saudi society, as Carmen bin Laden exposes the rigid boundaries that dictate their lives. Across these works, women are not merely passive victims of their circumstances; rather, they emerge as agents of change, reflecting broader socio-political transformations in their respective societies.

#### **2. Political and Colonial Struggles**

The lingering effects of colonialism and political struggles form a central theme in all three texts. In *My Salwa My Palestine*, Fawal vividly portrays how Palestinian identity is shaped by the historical and ongoing impact of colonialism, weaving together themes of

displacement, nationalism, and resistance. Mernissi, in *Teras Terlarang*, explores how colonial influences reshaped gender relations in Morocco, revealing the complex socio-political consequences of foreign rule. Meanwhile, bin Laden’s memoir provides insight into the interplay between Western influences and Saudi Arabian society, illustrating how external cultural forces and internal patriarchal structures shape the lived experiences of women. The persistent legacy of colonialism in these works underscores the intricate relationship between historical oppression and contemporary struggles for gender and social justice.

### 3. Identity and Resistance

The search for identity and the act of resistance are fundamental to the narratives of these texts. Mernissi’s characters challenge societal norms through personal rebellion, asserting their individuality within restrictive cultural settings. Fawal’s protagonists engage in political activism, positioning resistance as both a personal and collective endeavor. Similarly, *Inside the Kingdom* portrays the ways in which women resist oppression, whether through quiet defiance or overt challenges to societal expectations. In these stories, identity serves as a powerful tool for resistance, with personal struggles reflecting broader national and cultural conflicts. This theme is particularly evident in Fawal’s and bin Laden’s works, where the protagonists’ quests for self-definition are inextricably linked to larger national struggles for autonomy and justice.

### 4. Cultural Expectations and Societal Limitations

Each of these works examines the tension between traditional cultural values and the evolving aspirations of their characters. In *Teras Terlarang*, Mernissi captures the conflict between Moroccan traditions and the desire for personal freedom, depicting women who continuously push against societal constraints that dictate their roles and behaviors. Likewise, *Inside the Kingdom* exposes the contradictions within Saudi society, where modernization coexists uneasily with deeply entrenched traditionalism, particularly in relation to women’s rights. This ongoing struggle between tradition and modernity serves as a critical backdrop for understanding the decisions and actions of the characters, as they attempt to navigate the shifting landscapes of their respective societies.

Through these interwoven themes, *Teras Terlarang*, *My Salwa My Palestine*, and *Inside the Kingdom* offer nuanced portrayals of gender, power, and identity within postcolonial contexts. These works not only critique socio-political structures but also illuminate the resilience of individuals striving for personal and collective liberation in the face of systemic oppression.

These findings are further illustrated in the table below, which summarizes the key thematic elements and their manifestations in the selected literary works:

Theme	Teras Terlarang (Mernissi)	My Salwa My Palestine (Fawal)	Inside the Kingdom (Bin Laden)
Gender Resistance	Women challenging traditional roles through personal agency	Women actively participating in the Palestinian resistance movement	Women's struggle for autonomy within a patriarchal Saudi society
Colonialism	The effects of French colonialism on gender relations	The impact of Israeli occupation on Palestinian identity	Influence of Westernization and internal Saudi colonialism on women

Theme	<b>Teras Terlarang (Mernissi)</b>	<b>My Salwa My Palestine (Fawal)</b>	<b>Inside the Kingdom (Bin Laden)</b>
<b>Identity and Empowerment</b>	Reclaiming identity through resistance	National identity intertwined with gender and resistance	The conflict between cultural expectations and personal aspirations
<b>Analysis</b>	Personal empowerment within a restrictive social environment	Resistance as both a political and personal act	The negotiation of identity amid socio-political constraints

This structured comparison highlights the shared and distinct ways in which the themes of gender, power, and identity are explored across the three works, emphasizing their broader socio-political significance.

### Discussion

The thematic analysis of these literary works reveals how each author navigates the complex intersections of gender, colonialism, and identity within their respective socio-political contexts. These texts reflect the realities of their environments, where gender dynamics are deeply intertwined with political struggles and cultural norms.

Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory, particularly Chandra Talpade Mohanty's concept of *colonial discourse* (2003), it becomes evident that all three works illustrate how colonialism not only shapes national identity but also reinforces and reshapes gender norms. In *Teras Terlarang*, Mernissi's portrayal of the harem serves as a powerful metaphor for colonial intrusion into Moroccan society, where patriarchal traditions were both imposed and reinforced under colonial rule. In *My Salwa My Palestine*, Fawal demonstrates how colonial occupation intersects with the social and emotional constraints placed on Palestinian women. As these women actively engage in resistance, they simultaneously defy both colonial oppression and the patriarchal structures that seek to limit their roles. Similarly, in *Inside the Kingdom*, Carmen bin Laden's memoir highlights how Saudi women's struggle for personal freedom is influenced not only by rigid patriarchal traditions but also by Western ideals that shape their perceptions of autonomy and empowerment.

Michel Foucault's theory of power and resistance (1978) further enriches the understanding of how characters in these works navigate and contest oppressive structures. Foucault's argument that power is not merely imposed from above but also embedded in everyday practices resonates with Mernissi's exploration of internalized patriarchal control. In *Teras Terlarang*, while the harem represents confinement, it also becomes a space of resistance, where women subtly reclaim agency through defiant acts. In *My Salwa My Palestine*, Palestinian women's participation in resistance is both a political act and a deeply personal struggle against the gender norms that seek to marginalize them. These literary works emphasize that resistance is not only about overt political action but also about the assertion of personal agency within oppressive systems.

Ultimately, this study highlights the significance of literature in amplifying marginalized voices and providing a platform for the exploration of gender, identity, and political resistance. Through these texts, the authors not only illuminate the struggles of women in the Middle East and North Africa but also contribute to broader global discussions on gender equality, colonialism, and identity.

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#### D. Conclusion

This research examined the intersection of gender, identity, and socio-political struggles in the works of Fatima Mernissi (*Teras Terlarang*), Ibrahim Fawal (*My Salwa My Palestine*), and Carmen bin Laden (*Inside the Kingdom*). Through an analysis of these texts, the study revealed how each author engages with themes of resistance, colonialism, and empowerment within the contexts of the Middle East and North Africa. These literary works offer nuanced portrayals of women's agency in patriarchal societies while also shedding light on the lasting impact of colonial and postcolonial histories on gender dynamics and cultural identities. By depicting characters who struggle for both personal and collective empowerment, these texts highlight the multifaceted ways in which women resist and challenge oppressive political and cultural systems.

The findings underscore the role of literature as a critical medium for exploring and interrogating societal issues, particularly at the intersections of gender, power, and colonialism. These works not only provide valuable insights into the historical and cultural contexts of the Islamic world but also contribute to broader global discussions on gender equality, postcolonial resistance, and identity formation. By centering marginalized voices, Mernissi, Fawal, and bin Laden offer a vision of empowerment that extends beyond individual struggles, fostering a broader dialogue on social justice and human rights.

The implications of this research for Islamic education are significant, particularly in its potential to challenge traditional narratives and promote more inclusive, critical perspectives in the study of Islamic culture and literature. The findings advocate for the integration of feminist and postcolonial approaches into Islamic educational curricula, especially in examining women's roles in both historical and contemporary contexts. By fostering critical thinking and providing a platform for questioning cultural and religious norms, this research contributes to a more nuanced and progressive approach to Islamic education. In practice, it encourages educators to engage with texts that promote gender equality, social justice, and the empowerment of marginalized groups, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and equitable understanding of Islamic thought and culture.

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