



Patriarchal Sexual Politics in Fatimah Abd al-Hamid's *Ta' al-Niswah*: A Kate Millett Feminist Reading

Nafila Azzahra¹, Nur Asiyah², Hermawati Putri Dian Insani³, Muhammad Danial Fahmi⁴, Khoiriyah⁵

^{1,2,4,5} Arabic Language and Literature, Faculty of Adab and Language, State Islamic University Raden Mas Said Surakarta

³ Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Gadjah Mada

Email: nafila.azzahra@staff.uinsaid.ac.id, nur.asiyah@staff.uinsaid.ac.id, hermawati.putri.d@mail.ugm.ac.id, muhammad.danial.f@staff.uinsaid.ac.id, khoiriyah@staff.uinsaid.ac.id

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Abstract

Although contemporary Saudi urban spaces are often associated with modernization and women's increased visibility, literary representations suggest that patriarchal power persists in reconfigured forms. The mechanisms through which this power operates across domestic relations and urban consumer spaces therefore require closer textual examination. This study examines how patriarchal sexual politics is represented in Fatimah Abd Al-Hamid's *Ta' al-Niswah* and how its female characters internalize, negotiate, or resist domination in private and public spaces. Using a descriptive qualitative design within feminist literary criticism, the study applies close reading, systematic note-taking, and textual coding to the novel's first Arabic edition, published in 2014. Guided by Kate Millett's concepts of status, role, temperament, interior colonization, and patriarchy as a political institution, the analysis identifies five interrelated categories: coercive sexual subordination, unequal domestic labour, control over women's bodies and mobility, objectification and stereotypical representation, and women's internalization, negotiation, and resistance. These dynamics emerge in domestic, marital, occupational, and urban commercial spaces. The study shows that urban modernity does not eliminate patriarchal authority but reconfigures it through consumer culture, bodily regulation, social surveillance, and gendered expectations. However, its conclusions are limited to the novel's literary representation and should not be generalized to all Saudi women.

تجريد

Keywords:

Kate Millett;
Sexual Politics;
Patriarchal;
Domination;
Saudi Women's
Literature;
Ta'al-Niswah

غالبًا ما ترتبط الفضاءات الحضرية السعودية المعاصرة بالتحديث وتزايد حضور المرأة، إلا أن التمثيلات الأدبية تشير إلى استمرار السلطة الأبوية في صور معاد تشكيلها. ولذلك، تتطلب الآليات التي تعمل من خلالها هذه السلطة داخل العلاقات الأسرية وفضاءات الاستهلاك الحضرية فحصًا نصيًا أكثر عمقًا. تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية تمثيل السياسة الجنسية الأبوية في رواية تاء النسوة لفاطمة عبد الحميد، وكيف تستبطن شخصياتها النسائية الهيمنة الأبوية أو تتفاوض معها أو تقاومها في الفضاءين الخاص والعام. اعتمدت الدراسة تصميمًا وصفيًا نوعيًا ضمن النقد الأدبي النسوي، وطبقت القراءة المتعمقة والتدوين المنهجي للملاحظات والتميز النصي على الطبعة العربية الأولى من الرواية الصادرة عام ٢٠١٤.

واستنادًا إلى مفاهيم كيت ميليت المتعلقة بالمكانة والدور والطبع والاستعمار الداخلي والنظام الأبوي بوصفه مؤسسة سياسية، حدّد التحليل خمس فئات مترابطة: الإخضاع الجنسي القسري، وعدم التكافؤ في العمل المنزلي، والتحكم في أجساد النساء وحركتهن، وتشويه المرأة وتمثيلها بصورة نمطية، واستبطان النساء للهيمنة والتفاوض معها ومقاومتها. وتظهر هذه الديناميات في الفضاءات المنزلية والزواجية والمهنية والتجارية الحضرية. وتبين الدراسة أن الحداثة الحضرية لا تلغي السلطة الأبوية، بل تعيد تشكيلها من خلال الثقافة الاستهلاكية وضبط الجسد والمراقبة الاجتماعية والتوقعات الجندرية. ومع ذلك، تظل نتائج الدراسة محصورة في التمثيل الأدبي داخل الرواية، ولا ينبغي تعميمها على جميع النساء السعوديات.

الكلمات المفتاحية :

كيت ميليت
السياسة الحنسية
الهيمنة الأبوية
الأدب النسائي
السعودي
تأء النسوة

Abstrak

Meskipun ruang urban Saudi kontemporer sering dikaitkan dengan modernisasi dan meningkatnya visibilitas Perempuan, representasi sastra menunjukkan bahwa kekuasaan patriarki tetap bertahan dalam bentuk yang telah dikonfigurasi ulang. Oleh karenanya, mekanisme bekerjanya kekuasaan dalam relasi domestik dan ruang konsumsi urban memerlukan telaah tekstual yang lebih mendalam. Penelitian ini mengkaji representasi politik seksual patriarkal dalam novel *Ta' al-Niswah* karya Fatimah Abd Al-Hamid serta cara tokoh-tokoh perempuannya menginternalisasi, menegosiasikan, atau melawan dominasi patriarki di ruang privat dan publik. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain deskriptif kualitatif dalam kerangka kritik sastra feminis melalui pembacaan, pencatatan sistematis, dan pengodean tekstual terhadap edisi pertama novel berbahasa Arab yang terbit pada 2014. Dengan berpedoman pada konsep Kate Millett mengenai status, peran, temperamen, kolonisasi internal, dan patriarki sebagai institusi politik, analisis menemukan lima kategori yang saling berkaitan: subordinasi seksual koersif, ketimpangan kerja domestik, kontrol atas tubuh dan mobilitas perempuan, objektifikasi dan representasi stereotip, serta internalisasi, negosiasi, dan perlawanan perempuan. Dinamika tersebut muncul dalam ruang domestik, perkawinan, pekerjaan, dan ruang komersial urban. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa modernitas urban tidak menghapus kekuasaan patriarki, tetapi membentuknya kembali melalui budaya konsumsi, regulasi tubuh, pengawasan sosial, dan ekspektasi gender. Meskipun demikian, kesimpulannya terbatas pada representasi sastra dalam novel dan tidak dapat digeneralisasi terhadap seluruh perempuan Saudi.

Kata kunci:

Kate Millett;
Politik Seksual
Dominasi Patriarki
Sastra Perempuan
Arab Saudi
Ta'Kaum Perempuan

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A. Introduction

Contemporary Saudi fiction, particularly works written by women, provides an important space for examining the changing position of women amid urban modernization. Over the past two decades, Saudi women writers have increasingly articulated female

experiences, desires, and constraints within a rapidly transforming society. Novels such as Rajaa al-Sanea's *The Girls of Riyadh* (*Banāt ar-Riyādh*) (Al-Sanea, 2005), which explores friendship, love, and social expectations among young urban women and Badriyah Al-Bishr's *Hind and the Soldiers* (*Hind wal Askar*) (Al-Bishr, 2011), which reflects on gender norms and social control. These works reveal that although women have gained greater access to education, employment, consumer spaces, and public life, increased visibility does not necessarily eliminate the patriarchal structures that regulate their bodies, mobility, labor, and social roles. Recent scholarship likewise shows that representations of Saudi women are shaped by a tension between modernization, expanded public visibility, and the continuing discursive management of gender roles (Al-Qahtani, 2025; Alkhalil, 2025; AlQahtani & Alghamdi, 2025; Saputra et al., 2025).

The social conditions represented in the novel correspond with broader debates concerning the discrepancy between formal commitments to gender equality and women's lived experiences. Although international and scholarly discussions increasingly emphasize women's autonomy and equal participation in society (Beloskar et al., 2024; Nations, 2015; Women, 2018), patriarchal relations continue to impose restrictions on women's choices and social positions (Christianson et al., 2021; Millett, 2016). Women are frequently required to preserve family honor, accept unequal domestic responsibilities, comply with limitations on marriage and mobility, and conform to socially prescribed models of femininity (Allen, 2016; Sari & Wiyatmi, 2021). Their bodies are also interpreted through masculine interests, fantasies, and standards, transforming physical appearance into an object of social evaluation and control (Bray & Colebrook, 1998). Consequently, access to education, employment, and public space does not automatically free women from patriarchal judgment because their social existence may remain shaped by expectations concerning beauty, obedience, sexuality, and respectability (Aulia et al., 2024; Gqola et al., 2024). Comparative research on gender reform under authoritarian conditions also cautions that state-sponsored equality may coexist with selective implementation, elite framing, and continuing guardian-based constraints (Allam, 2025; Bush & Zetterberg, 2024; Nordvik, 2026; Shalaby & Wängnerud, 2024).

Kate Millett's theory of sexual politics offers a relevant framework for examining these forms of domination. Millett defines politics not merely as formal governmental activity but as a power relationship through which one group controls another (Millett, 2016). From this perspective, the relationship between men and women constitutes a

fundamental political structure because sex operates as a status category that determines the distribution of authority, privilege, and social opportunity. Millett identifies patriarchy as a pervasive institution in which men maintain power over women through physical, ideological, economic, and cultural mechanisms. This domination functions through a process of "interior colonization," in which patriarchal values penetrate women's consciousness through socialization and encourage them to internalize their subordinate position as natural or biologically determined (Millett, 2016). Patriarchal power is therefore reproduced not only through direct coercion but also through institutions such as marriage, family, education, sexuality, culture, and the division of domestic labor. Millett's concepts of status, role, and temperament are particularly useful for identifying how women are positioned socially, assigned gendered responsibilities, and expected to embody culturally approved characteristics (Millett, 2016). Recent literary and discourse studies reinforce this argument by demonstrating how patriarchal norms may be internalized through religious interpretation, ideological rhetoric, and representational framing (Cahaya, 2026; Fajri, 2025; Mulyadi et al., 2025).

Within literary studies, feminist criticism treats literature as an ideological space in which women's experiences, bodies, voices, and social positions are represented and contested (Sugihastuti & Suharto, 2016). Previous studies demonstrate the analytical value of Millett's theory but also reveal limitations that create space for the present research. Sari and Wiyatmi (2021), for example, identified seven forms of sexual politics in Twitter-based mini-fiction: sexual slavery, unequal domestic labor, control over women, harassment, stereotyping, rape and negotiation, and violences (Sari & Wiyatmi, 2021). Within Saudi literary studies, Tijani examined the intersection of gender, culture, religion, love, and marriage in Rajaa Alsanea's *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* through Islamic feminism (Tijani, 2019), while Alshhre (2024) investigated patriarchal gender roles, identity, and women's pursuit of agency in Badriyah Al-Bishr's *Hend wa al-ʿAskar* (Alshhre, 2024). Almuthaybiri (2025) further demonstrated how Saudi women's narratives challenge patriarchal expectations concerning women's status and roles in private and public life (Almuthaybiri, 2025). Collectively, these studies establish Saudi fiction as an important site for examining gendered domination and women's agency. However, they do not analyze *Ta' al-Niswah* through Millett's interrelated concepts of status, role, temperament, interior colonization, and patriarchy as a political institution, nor do they explain how sexual politics operates across interconnected Saudi urban commercial spaces and private domestic relationships.

Recent studies of Arabic literary and audiovisual texts further identify discrimination, subaltern silencing, identity construction, orientalist hegemony, and symbolic resistance as effects of representation rather than transparent reflections of social reality (A'la, 2025; Hasri et al., 2025; Nazar et al., 2026; Syarifuddin et al., 2026; Wardah & Surur, 2025).

This study addresses that gap by reading *Ta' al-Niswah* as a narrative of patriarchal sexual politics operating across the interconnected public and private spaces of contemporary Saudi urban life. Its originality lies not merely in applying Millett's theory to a previously understudied novel, but in operationalizing patriarchal power through five interrelated categories: sexual slavery, unequal domestic labor, control over women's bodies and mobility, the objectification and stereotypical representation of women, and women's strategies of negotiation and resistance. These categories enable the analysis to connect institutional domination with the female characters' everyday experiences. The study examines how beauty standards are internalized, how women's bodies are commodified and biologically regulated, how the mirror functions as a symbol of standardized femininity, how the niqab becomes a means of negotiating identity and visibility, and how relationships among women may be shaped by competition for recognition within a patriarchal order. It also considers marital relationships, including those between Ahlam and Omar and between Ranim and Majed, as representations of sexuality and the family not simply as spaces of intimacy, but as sites where domination, obedience, and subjectification are produced (Al-Hamid, 2014). A recent analysis of *Niswah al-Sūq al-'Atiq* similarly demonstrates that gender, social position, and economic relations intersect in literary representations of women's struggle within patriarchal society (Putri & Abshar, 2025).

Accordingly, this study addresses two explicit research questions: first, how are forms of patriarchal sexual politics represented through the status, roles, bodies, labor, mobility, and social relationships of the female characters in *Ta' al-Niswah*? Second, how do the female characters negotiate, internalize, or resist patriarchal domination within both private and public spaces? Through these questions, the study aims to explain how patriarchal socialization constructs women's identities and everyday behavior while also identifying the possibilities and limitations of female agency. Particular attention is given to the process of interior colonization, through which beauty standards, domestic subordination, bodily discipline, and gendered temperament are accepted or perceived as natural expectations.

The analysis is limited to Fatimah Abd Al-Hamid's *Ta' al-Niswah* as its primary literary material and Kate Millett's theory of sexual politics as its central theoretical framework. Therefore, the findings are not intended to represent the full range of women's experiences in Saudi Arabia or contemporary Arabic literature. Instead, the study offers a textually grounded account of how one Saudi novel portrays the persistence and transformation of patriarchal power within modern urban life. By bringing Millett's radical feminist framework into dialogue with Saudi women's fiction, the research contributes to feminist literary criticism by demonstrating that urban modernity may not dismantle patriarchy but may reconfigure it through consumer culture, bodily regulation, domestic inequality, gendered expectations, and women's everyday negotiations.

B. Research Methods

This study used a descriptive qualitative design within feminist literary criticism. The primary source was the complete first Arabic edition of Fatimah Abd Al-Hamid's *Ta' al-Niswah*, published by Dār Athar lil-Nashr wa al-Tawzī' in 2014/1435 and comprising 253 pages (Al-Hamid, 2014)). All quotations and page references were taken from this edition. Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (Millett, 2016) provided the main theoretical framework, supported by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2020) qualitative analysis model and relevant feminist literary studies (Miles et al., 2020).

The data consisted of sentences, dialogues, paragraphs, and continuous scenes representing patriarchal domination, its internalization, and women's responses. Passages were selected purposively when they showed unequal status, gendered roles, domestic inequality, bodily regulation, objectification, negotiation, or resistance. Repetitive excerpts and passages without sufficient narrative context were excluded. Through repeated close reading, the selected passages were recorded in a matrix containing the Arabic text, page number, context, transliteration, English translation, code, category, and interpretive note. The matrix contained 79 category assignments. Simultaneous coding was applied because one scene could represent several dimensions of sexual politics.

Coding combined deductive and interpretive procedures. Initial codes were derived from Millett's concepts of status, role, temperament, family, bodily regulation, economic dependence, objectification, socialization, and interior colonization (Millett, 2016). Descriptive codes such as marital coercion, unpaid caregiving, mobility restriction,

beauty-based valuation, self-surveillance, strategic conformity, and verbal refusal were assigned before being grouped into five analytical categories.

Millettian focus	Analytical category
Unequal status, sexual politics, temperament, and the patriarchal family	Coercive sexual subordination
Gendered role, temperament, and economic dependence	Unequal domestic labour
Patriarchal status, bodily regulation, surveillance, and interior colonization	Control over bodies and mobility
Reification, social status, gendered temperament, and the social gaze	Objectification and stereotypical representation
Interior colonization and the contestation of status, role, and temperament	Internalization, negotiation, and resistance

Data analysis followed the stages of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020). The passages were selected, coded, compared, and interpreted within their complete narrative contexts. The analysis then examined relationships among gendered status, domestic roles, bodily regulation, urban commercial spaces, and women's responses. Preliminary interpretations were checked against passages that contradicted or complicated the emerging categories.

Arabic passages were transcribed from the original edition and transliterated using a modified IJMES system. English translations were first produced literally and then adjusted for grammatical clarity. Terms without precise English equivalents, such as niqab, abaya, and ghutra, were retained. Interpretive credibility was maintained through repeated reading, comparison between the Arabic text and its translation, theoretical triangulation, and documentation of coding decisions. The findings concern literary representations within the novel and are not intended to represent the experiences of all Saudi women.

C. Result and Discussion.

1. Results

This section presents the findings on sexual politics in Fatimah Abd Al-Hamid's *Ta' al-Niswah*, analysed through Kate Millett's theory. Five interrelated categories were identified. The first four - coercive sexual subordination, unequal domestic labour, regulation of women's bodies and mobility, and objectification and stereotypical representation - show how patriarchal power structures women's status, roles, bodies, labour, mobility, and relationships. The fifth examines women's responses through internalization, negotiation, and resistance.

These categories are analytically distinct but closely connected. Coercive sexual subordination concerns unequal power in marital and intimate relationships. Unequal domestic labour refers to the gendered assignment of household and care responsibilities. Bodily and mobility regulation concerns restrictions on women's actions, movement, employment, appearance, and public presence. Objectification concerns how women are viewed and valued according to beauty, sexuality, respectability, and male approval. Internalization, negotiation, and resistance describe women's different responses to these conditions.

Analytical Category	Milletian Focus	Textual Indicators	Principal Data and Examples
Coercive sexual subordination	Unequal status, sexual politics, temperament, and the patriarchal family	Intimate violence, unequal sexual authority, compulsory availability, reproductive appropriation, and ownership-like treatment	pp. 42–44, 83–84, 164, 178–179, 198–199, 207, 217, 234–237: Ranim's early marriage, Ahlām's violent marital experiences, and the alteration of Azhār's mother's body according to her husband's preference.
Unequal domestic labour	Gendered role, temperament, and economic dependence	Cooking, caregiving, childcare, ironing, household management, and the treatment of service as women's natural duty	pp. 35, 40–41, 44, 82, 142, 145–146, 178, 227, 234: caregiving by Azhār and Ahlām, Ghaliyah's responsibility for the ghutra, and Ranim's repositioning as a housewife
Control over bodies and mobility	Patriarchal status, bodily regulation, surveillance, and interior colonization	Restrictions on clothing, movement, employment, transportation, motherhood, weight, sexuality, photography, and public visibility	pp. 35–36, 43–44, 49–50, 57–60, 66–67, 114, 145–146, 158, 161, 187–188, 198–199, 204, 217, 234–237, 251: family supervision of women's mobility, Omar's regulation of Ahlām's routine, and women's self-monitoring.
Objectification and stereotypical representation	Reification, social status, gendered temperament, and the social gaze	Evaluation through beauty, age, skin colour, weight, body shape, sexuality, respectability, or marital status	pp. 23, 31–32, 42–45, 61–64, 82–85, 123–124, 161–163, 184–186, 202, 217, 241, 248–251: fragmented descriptions of women's bodies, cosmetic correction, mirrors, lingerie, and occupational stigma.
Internalization, negotiation, and resistance	Interior colonization and the contestation of status, role, and temperament	Self-surveillance, strategic compliance, refusal, confrontation, economic participation, solidarity, and bodily boundary-setting	pp. 35, 49–50, 60, 66–67, 83, 97–99, 124, 130, 142, 145–146, 150, 158, 167, 175–177, 181–182, 198, 207, 238–239, 249–252: negotiation of employment and mobility, rejection of domestic expectations, and resistance to violence or bodily intrusion.

The findings show that patriarchy operates across marital, domestic, occupational, and urban commercial spaces. Marriage and the household reproduce

unequal sexual authority and gendered labour, while workplaces, vehicles, malls, cosmetics stores, and lingerie shops extend control through surveillance, restricted mobility, beauty standards, and consumer expectations. In Millett's terms, unequal status legitimizes male authority, gendered roles assign service and care to women, and socially constructed temperament associates masculinity with control and femininity with obedience. Through interior colonization, these norms may also become forms of self-surveillance (Millett, 2016).

2. Discussion

Representations of Patriarchal Sexual Politics

a. Coercive Sexual Subordination

Coercive sexual subordination in *Ta' al-Niswah* is represented through intimate violence, unequal sexual authority, compulsory submission, and the restriction of women's agency within marriage. In this study, it refers specifically to situations in which female characters cannot freely determine the conditions of their intimate or marital relationships because male authority is supported by violence, family expectations, or unequal social status.

Ahlām's marriage to Omar provides the clearest representation of this form of domination. While Azhār listens from the kitchen, Ahlām shows her mother the physical evidence of Omar's violence. Her mother responds by describing his conduct as an ordinary masculine characteristic:

“أَحْلَامًا كَانَتْ تَعْرِضُهُ عَلَى أُمِّي فِي وَسِيلَةٍ إِضْحَاحٍ طَارِجَةٍ فَوْقَ جَسَدِهِ. - هَذَا كُلُّهُ أَمْرٌ عَادِيٌّ يَا أَحْلَامُ، بَعْضُ الرِّجَالِ يَدُهُ قَاسِيَةٌ فِي غُرْفَةِ النَّوْمِ، هِيَ صِفَةٌ خُلِقَتْ بِهِ”

'Ahlām showed it to my mother as a new way of explaining herself. - All this is normal, Ahlam, some men have rough hands in the bedroom, it's a trait that was created in him' (Al-Hamid, 2014, p. 178)

The mother's statement transforms violence from a deliberate action into an innate quality. Omar's "rough hand" is compared to a physical trait that he cannot change. This explanation removes responsibility from him and places the burden of adaptation on Ahlām. In Millett's terms, the passage reflects unequal status because the husband's actions are granted greater legitimacy than the wife's pain. It also reflects gendered temperament: masculine aggression is treated as natural, while feminine patience and submission are expected as appropriate responses.

The scene further shows how the family reproduces patriarchal authority. Ahlām's mother does not merely fail to protect her daughter; she supplies an ideological explanation that normalizes the violence. Patriarchal power therefore does not depend solely on Omar's physical dominance. It is reinforced through family discourse that teaches women to interpret suffering as an ordinary part of marriage.

Omar's authority also extends to Ahlām's sexual presence and perception. Ahlām explains that he does not want her to observe him during sexual activity:

"يَفْقِدُ شَهِيَّتَهُ إِذَا رَأَاهَا تُرَاقِبُهُ ... مَعْصُومَةُ الْعَيْنَيْنِ فِي كُلِّ لَيْلَةٍ"

'He loses his passion when he sees Ahlām watching him... Her eyes are closed every night' (Al-Hamid, 2014, p. 179)

The blindfold does more than obstruct Ahlām's sight. It denies her active presence in the sexual relationship. Omar wants access to her body while rejecting her gaze, awareness, and participation. Her fear is subordinated to his desire, which is treated as the organizing principle of the encounter. The comparison between sexual desire and appetite further reduces intimacy to male consumption. Ahlām is not represented as an equal participant whose comfort and consent shape the relationship. Instead, she is required to accommodate conditions established by her husband.

From Millett's perspective, the scene illustrates how sexuality becomes political when one party controls the terms of intimate interaction. Omar occupies the active and authoritative position, whereas Ahlām is assigned passivity. The blindfold materializes this unequal status by restricting her ability to see and respond. It therefore signifies not only bodily control but also the denial of female subjectivity.

Ahlām's attempt to express her fear receives another response that protects the marital structure rather than the woman experiencing violence:

"الْعِبْرَةُ مِنَ الزَّوْاجِ هِيَ الصَّبْرُ"

'The lesson of marriage is patience' (Al-Hamid, 2014, p. 179)

Patience in this statement does not function as mutual commitment. It becomes a gendered obligation imposed on the wife. Omar is not instructed to stop his violence or alter his conduct. Instead, Ahlām is encouraged to endure the relationship and wait for an uncertain change. The statement transfers responsibility from the perpetrator to the victim: the continuation of the marriage depends on Ahlām's ability to tolerate suffering.

This response also illustrates Millett's concept of interior colonization. Ahlām's mother has absorbed the belief that a wife's role is to preserve marriage through endurance. She therefore reproduces patriarchal expectations even though she is herself a woman within the same gendered order. The family functions as a political institution by teaching that the husband's authority must be accommodated and that marital stability is more important than the wife's bodily security.

Overall, Ahlām's experience shows that coercive sexual subordination operates through the combined effects of unequal marital status, intimate violence, and patriarchal normalization. Omar's authority over her body and sexual presence reflects the political character of intimacy, while her mother's emphasis on patience reproduces gendered roles and temperaments that privilege male dominance and female endurance. In Millett's terms, the family functions as a patriarchal institution that legitimizes coercion and encourages women to internalize their subordination.

b. Unequal Domestic Labour

In *Ta' al-Niswah*, unequal domestic labour is represented through the expectation that women should manage the household, provide care, protect family reputation, and serve men's needs (Reich-Stiebert et al., 2023). These responsibilities are treated not as shared work but as natural extensions of femininity. From Millett's perspective, this division reflects the interaction of role and temperament: women are assigned domestic and caregiving roles because they are socially constructed as patient, attentive, obedient, and suited to service (Millett, 2016). Domestic labour therefore becomes political because it supports unequal gender status and limits women's time, autonomy, and access to economic life (Sari & Wiyatmi, 2021). Recent feminist work on social reproduction likewise treats women's unpaid work as a material and ecological structure rather than a private or naturally feminine duty (Deckard, 2024).

The domestic work of women in the novel *Ta' al-Niswah* is evident in the burden of service and preservation of family symbols imposed on female characters. In the novel, Ghalia is depicted in a domestic relationship with a male object, namely the ghutra, a head covering typical of Arab men. In family life, the ghutra is an integral part of a man's identity and must be cared for by women. If the ghutra is damaged or burned while ironing, the blame is placed entirely on the woman, and she is considered

to have failed to uphold this symbol of male honor in the family. In an excerpt from the novel, it is stated:

“أَكْرَهُ الْغُتْرَةَ يَا بَنَاتُ، وَأَكْرَهُ كَيْفَهَا حَتَّى، وَلَنْ أَجْتَهِدَ أَبَدًا فِي تَعَلُّمِهِ!”

‘O girls, I hate ghutras, I hate even ironing them, And I will never be serious about learning it!’

(Al-Hamid, 2014, p. 146)

Ironing the ghutra is not represented as a neutral household skill. The garment symbolizes masculine identity and social respectability, while women are expected to preserve its cleanliness and appearance. Ghaliyah's grandmother introduces the task as knowledge that should be passed from one generation of women to another. Domestic labour therefore becomes a process of gender socialization through which girls learn that caring for male needs and symbols is part of proper femininity.

Domestic labour in the novel also includes the management of family relationships and social reputation. Azhār describes her mother's approach to exchanging food with neighbour's:

“هَذَا مَنْطِقُ أُمِّي فِي الْحَيَاةِ، كُلُّ شَيْءٍ يُشْبِهُ «سَكْبَةَ الصَّحْنِ» الَّتِي نَسْتَلِمُهَا أَوْ نَرُدُّهَا لِلْجِيرَانِ. أُمِّي وَحْدَهَا مَنْ تُقَرِّرُ مَاذَا نَرُدُّ فِي الصَّحْنِ”

‘This is my mother's logic of life. Everything is like the return of the dishes we receive or return to our neighbors. My mother decides what we return on the plates’ (Al-Hamid, 2014, p. 227)

This practice shows that women's domestic work extends beyond cooking and cleaning. Azhār's mother manages reciprocity with neighbour's and determines how the family presents itself socially. She must calculate the quantity and quality of what is returned so that the exchange neither appears excessive nor disrespectful. Her labour therefore includes social judgment, emotional management, and the protection of family reputation. The novel's description emphasizes that this practice requires experience and careful decision-making, even though it remains confined to the domestic sphere.

Elsewhere, Ranim's repositioning as a housewife further connects domestic roles with economic dependence. Marriage does not merely change her personal relationship; it also reshapes her access to employment and public life. The expectation that a wife should prioritize the household reinforces a division in which men retain greater access to economic authority while women become responsible for unpaid

reproductive and care work. In this sense, domestic labour sustains patriarchy materially as well as ideologically.

Overall, unequal domestic labour in *Ta' al-Niswah* operates through caregiving, household service, the preservation of masculine symbols, and the management of family reputation. Millett's concepts of role and temperament explain how these responsibilities are naturalized as feminine duties, while economic dependence reinforces women's subordinate status. Although characters such as Ghaliyah question these expectations, domestic work remains a key mechanism through which the patriarchal family reproduces gender inequality across generations.

c. Regulation of Women's Bodies and Mobility

The regulation of women's bodies and mobility in *Ta' al-Niswah* extends beyond direct physical restriction. It includes control over movement, transportation, employment, appearance, motherhood, bodily condition, and public conduct. Within Millett's framework, such regulation is enabled by unequal status, which grants men and male family members greater authority to determine where women may go and how they should behave. It also operates through surveillance and interior colonization, as external restrictions gradually become forms of anticipation and self-monitoring.

Azhār's access to work and public space is regulated through an informal arrangement made by her brothers. Azhār is allowed to work, yet her movement remains limited to a route and purpose approved by her brothers. Employment therefore provides access to urban public life without granting complete mobility. Her brothers retain the authority to define the acceptable boundaries of that access. The scene reflects unequal status because Azhār's movement is treated as a family matter over which male relatives may exercise supervision.

A more direct form of regulation appears in Ahlām's marriage to Omar. Her daily movements are organized through a system of telephone signals:

"أَنَّهُ إِذَا كَانَ قَادِمًا لِأَخْذِهَا سَتَرْنِ رَتَّتَانِ بِمَعْنَى: اسْتَعِدِّي، وَإِذَا كَانَتْ رَنَّةً وَاحِدَةً فَذَلِكَ يَعْنِي: انْزِلِي فَوْرًا."
'if he came to fetch her, she would ring twice, meaning: get ready, and if it was one ring, that would mean: come down at once.' (Al-Hamid, 2014, p. 188)

The telephone appears here as an instrument of urban modernity, yet it does not necessarily expand freedom. Instead, it enables Omar to exercise authority from a

distance. The private power of the husband follows Ahlām into her movements between the household and the city. This illustrates how modern technologies may reconfigure patriarchal supervision rather than eliminate it.

Regulation also reaches the biological condition of women's bodies. Azhār's mother describes how her husband used appetite pills and injections to change her weight according to his preference:

"كُنْتُ كَذَا... كَذَا، أَبُوكُمْ خَرَّبَنِي، أَتَلَفَ جِسْمِي بِالْحُبُوبِ. أُحِبُّ الْمُتَلَيَّاتِ، أُحِبُّ السِّمَانَ... وَهَذِهِ حُبُوبٌ لِفَتْحِ الشَّهِيَّةِ، وَهَذِهِ إِبْرٌ أَسْرَعُ."

'I was like this before...like this. Your fathers did this to me, did this to my body with pills. I like curvy women, I like fat women...this is a pill to stimulate appetite, and this is a quicker injection.'
(Al-Hamid, 2014, p. 2)

The passage shows that the husband's aesthetic preference becomes a form of material intervention. Azhār's mother does not simply experience pressure to meet a beauty standard; her body is actively modified through medication. Her husband's preference is treated as more important than her bodily autonomy or health. The result is not only a change in appearance but also physical weakness and suffering.

These examples show that regulation of women's bodies and mobility in *Ta' al-Niswah* operates through family supervision, marital authority, bodily modification, restricted motherhood, and self-surveillance. Millett's concept of status explains why men are positioned as legitimate decision-makers, while interior colonization explains how external restrictions become women's own practices of self-monitoring. Unlike objectification, which determines how women are seen and valued, regulation determines what they may do, where they may go, and how their bodies may be shaped. The novel therefore presents patriarchal control as a political structure that crosses the boundaries between household, marriage, employment, technology, and urban public life.

d. Objectification and Stereotypical Representation

Objectification and stereotypical representation in *Ta' al-Niswah* occur when women are reduced to bodily appearance, sexual attractiveness, beauty, age, marital value, or social respectability. Rather than being recognized as complete subjects, female characters are viewed through standards that determine which bodies are desirable, acceptable, or worthy of attention. Within Millett's framework, this process

reflects unequal status, since women's social value is made dependent on external judgment. It also reproduces gendered temperament by associating femininity with beauty, delicacy, sexual appeal, and the obligation to satisfy male expectations.

These representations are especially visible in the novel's urban commercial spaces. The cosmetics store *Sidrah* does not merely sell beauty products. It also encourages women to divide their bodies into parts that must be examined, concealed, corrected, or improved. In one exchange, a cosmetic product is evaluated according to its ability to hide bodily imperfections:

"المهم عندي أن يكون كريماً ذا قاعدة تدوم وقتاً طويلاً، وقادراً على إخفاء بعض هذا... تعنين الأماكن الصالحة للنظر؟"

'What matters to me is that it be a cream with a long-lasting base and that it can conceal some of this... Do you mean the parts that are still fit to be looked at?' (Al-Hamid, 2014, pp. 62-63)

The exchange presents the female body as a collection of visible parts that can be classified according to whether they remain "fit to be looked at." The body is not approached as an integrated part of the woman's identity but as an object exposed to visual judgment. Cosmetics become instruments for concealing the parts considered undesirable and emphasizing those that remain socially acceptable.

The setting of *Sidrah* is important because it connects objectification with urban consumer culture. The shop appears to offer women choice, employment, and access to modern beauty products. Yet these products are marketed through the assumption that the female body is naturally deficient and requires continuous improvement. Modern consumption therefore does not necessarily free women from patriarchal expectations. Instead, it can transform those expectations into commercial practices through which women purchase products to manage their visibility and social value. Systematic evidence links idealized advertising imagery with harmful effects on women's self-perception, while relationship research shows that perceived partner-objectification may be internalized through self-objectification and reduced body appreciation (Dai et al., 2025; Kranz, 2025).

A similar pattern appears in the lingerie shop *Ghasaq*. The store displays an idealized female body through a slender, light-skinned mannequin dressed in nightwear. The mannequin establishes a visual standard against which women may compare their own bodies. Its slimness, smoothness, and stillness create an image of controlled femininity. It does not speak, resist, age, or display bodily difference. In this

sense, the mannequin embodies a stereotypical feminine temperament: attractive, silent, passive, and available for observation. Its idealized form reinforces the expectation that real women should approximate a commercially produced image.

The male gaze becomes even more explicit in the discussion of nightwear:

"مَلَابِسُ النَّوْمِ هِيَ أَكْثَرُ الْمَلَابِسِ الَّتِي يَجِبُ أَنْ يَرْضَى عَنْهَا كِلَا الطَّرَفَيْنِ! أَحْيَانًا يَكْفِي أَنْ يَرْضَى الرَّجُلُ عَنْهَا"
'Nightwear is the one type of clothing that both parties have to agree on the most! Sometimes, it is enough that the man likes it.' (Al-Hamid, 2014, p. 204)

The first sentence appears to emphasize mutual satisfaction. The second, however, removes that equality by suggesting that male approval alone may be sufficient. The woman's preference becomes secondary, even though the clothing is worn on her body. This scene illustrates how women's bodies are positioned as objects intended for consumption within intimate relationships.

In another occasion, objectification is also connected to marriage and family status. Ranim's selection as a wife is based largely on her appearance:

"تَزَوَّجَتْ وَهِيَ فِي السَّابِعَةِ عَشْرَةَ زَوْجًا تَقْلِيدِيًّا... رَأَوْا فِي بَيَاضِ بَشَرَةِ رَنِيمٍ، وَنُعُومَةِ شَعْرِهَا، وَخُضْرَةِ عَيْنَيْهَا
 فُرْصَةً مُنَاسِبَةً."
'She entered a traditional marriage at the age of seventeen... They saw in Ranim's fair skin, soft hair, and green eyes a suitable opportunity.' (Al-Hamid, 2014, pp. 42-43)

The description fragments Ranim into skin colour, hair texture, and eye colour. Her physical features are treated as assets that can increase the value of the husband's family. She is not initially described through her personality, aspirations, or readiness for marriage. Instead, her appearance becomes the basis on which she is judged as a suitable wife. This passage was also classified under coercive sexual subordination because Ranim's early marriage reflects unequal marital status.

Overall, objectification and stereotypical representation in *Ta' al-Niswah* reduce women to appearance, sexual desirability, marital value, and social respectability. Through cosmetics, mirrors, mannequins, lingerie, and family evaluations of beauty, the novel shows how the social gaze operates across both intimate and commercial spaces. Millett's concepts of status, temperament, and interior colonization explain how women's value becomes dependent on external approval and how these standards are absorbed into self-perception. Urban modernity consequently does not eliminate patriarchal objectification but commercializes and reproduces it through beauty consumption, visual display, and gendered expectations.

e. Women's Responses to Patriarchal Domination

The female characters in *Ta' al-Niswah* respond to patriarchal domination through internalization, negotiation, and resistance. These responses form a continuum rather than three entirely separate positions. Internalization occurs when women absorb patriarchal expectations and regulate themselves accordingly. Negotiation involves creating limited room for movement or choice without directly overturning male authority, while resistance emerges through explicit refusal, confrontation, and the assertion of personal boundaries.

Internalization is evident in Ghaliyah's careful regulation of an ordinary bodily gesture:

"غَالِيَةُ الَّتِي تَخَافُ أَنْ تُبَيِّنَ شَفَتَيْهَا الْجَافَتَيْنِ بِلسَانِهَا أَمَامَ رَجُلٍ غَابِرٍ، كَيْ لَا يَفْهَمَهَا خَطَأً."

'Ghaliyah is afraid to moisten her dry lips with her tongue in front of a passing man, lest he misunderstand her.' (Al-Hamid, 2014, p. 204)

Although no man directly prohibits the gesture, Ghaliyah anticipates male judgment and modifies her behaviour. An ordinary bodily need becomes a potential threat to her reputation because male interpretation is treated as socially authoritative. This reflects Millett's concept of interior colonization, in which external patriarchal surveillance becomes self-surveillance. Ghaliyah observes herself through an imagined male gaze and assumes responsibility for preventing possible misinterpretation. The scene also reflects gendered temperament, as femininity is associated with modesty, restraint, and reduced bodily visibility.

Negotiation appears when women strategically adjust patriarchal restrictions without fully escaping them. Ranim, for example, modifies the informal transportation arrangement imposed by Azhār's brothers, thereby expanding Azhār's mobility while leaving the family's authority formally intact. She also uses telephone communication to preserve her emotional relationship with Iyad despite restrictions on her maternal presence. These actions do not eliminate patriarchal control, but they show how women employ solidarity, technology, and practical adaptation to create limited spaces of agency. Urban modernity is therefore ambivalent: communication devices may be used to supervise women, but they can also help women sustain relationships and extend their movement.

Resistance becomes more explicit when women directly reject male intrusion or gendered expectations. One female character openly asserts authority over her body in a public space:

"مِنْ فَضْلِكَ، هَذَا مَكَانٌ عَامٌّ... لَا تُمَسِّكُ يَدِي بِهَذَا الشَّكْلِ!"

'Please, this is a public place... Do not hold my hand like this!' (Al-Hamid, 2014, p. 158)

Unlike Ghaliyah's self-restriction, this response places responsibility on the man whose conduct violates her bodily boundary. The speaker does not adjust her own behaviour to avoid male attention but directly identifies the unwanted contact and commands him to stop. The public setting supports this resistance by allowing the woman to make the violation visible and verbally contest it. Thus, urban spaces expose women to surveillance and harassment while also providing opportunities for speech, visibility, and boundary-setting.

Other forms of resistance include Ranim's rejection of automatic caregiving duties at work, Ghaliyah's refusal to learn how to iron the ghutra, and Azhār's questioning of the family discourse that normalizes Omar's violence against Ahlām. These actions challenge Millett's categories of role, temperament, and unequal status by refusing the assumption that women must naturally serve, endure, or remain silent. Nevertheless, resistance remains partial and situated because the characters continue to live within family, marital, and social structures that privilege male authority.

Overall, women's responses in *Ta' al-Niswah* move between self-surveillance, strategic adaptation, solidarity, and direct refusal. Internalization demonstrates the ideological depth of patriarchal power, negotiation creates limited opportunities within restrictive conditions, and resistance challenges specific forms of bodily control and gendered obligation. The characters therefore exercise constrained agency rather than achieving complete liberation, revealing that patriarchal domination may be contested even when its broader political and social structures remain intact.

f. Patriarchy and the Reconfiguration of Power in Modern Urban Spaces

The findings show that patriarchy in *Ta' al-Niswah* functions not as a series of isolated conflicts but as a political institution structured through unequal status, role, and temperament. Male authority shapes marriage, sexuality, reproduction, mobility, and employment, while women are assigned domestic, caregiving, and emotional responsibilities that are naturalized through expectations of patience, obedience, and

restraint. These structures connect the principal forms of domination identified in the novel. Objectification determines women's value through beauty and sexual desirability, bodily regulation restricts their movement, employment, appearance, and public presence, unequal domestic labour institutionalizes gendered service, and coercive sexual subordination concentrates these inequalities within marriage and intimacy. Although women respond through negotiation, solidarity, refusal, and boundary-setting, their agency remains constrained by familial authority, economic dependence, and internalized patriarchal norms.

The novel further demonstrates that urban modernity does not dismantle this political structure but relocates and reconfigures its mechanisms. Workplaces, vehicles, shopping malls, cosmetics stores, lingerie shops, and communication technologies expand women's visibility, mobility, employment, and access to consumption, yet these spaces also reproduce surveillance, beauty standards, bodily discipline, male approval, and restrictions on movement. Patriarchal authority therefore operates across both domestic and urban-commercial spaces, combining traditional familial power with modern consumer and technological practices. In this way, *Ta' al-Niswah* reveals that modern urban life may create limited opportunities for women while simultaneously producing new mechanisms for regulating their bodies, identities, labour, and social participation.

D. Conclusion

This study concludes that patriarchal sexual politics in Fatimah Abd Al-Hamid's *Ta' al-Niswah* is represented through coercive sexual subordination, unequal domestic labour, regulation of women's bodies and mobility, objectification and stereotypical representation, and women's internalization, negotiation, and resistance. These findings show that patriarchal domination extends from marriage and domestic relations into modern urban spaces. Workplaces, vehicles, shopping malls, cosmetics stores, and lingerie shops become new arenas in which patriarchy is reproduced through beauty consumption, bodily discipline, mobility restrictions, marital expectations, and gendered domestic relations. Although the female characters develop agency through solidarity, strategic adaptation, refusal, and boundary-setting, their actions remain constrained by unequal status, gendered roles, and internalized patriarchal values.

The study contributes theoretically to feminist scholarship on contemporary Arabic literature by extending Millett's sexual politics beyond conventional domestic and marital settings to urban consumer culture. It demonstrates that modernization does not simply weaken patriarchy but may transform its mechanisms by combining familial authority, commercial beauty standards, social surveillance, and consumer practices. As the analysis is limited to the literary representation constructed in a single Saudi novel, its findings cannot be generalized to Saudi women's lived experiences. Future research should compare *Ta' al-Niswah* with other contemporary Saudi and Arab women's novels and examine how gender intersects with class, age, marital status, and consumer identity in different urban contexts.

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