

"My body is not mine": Woman Oppression Portrayed in Layla Al-Ammar's *The Pact We Made*

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ABSTRACT

*This study analyzes the oppression and differences between modern life and family life in traditional conservative Kuwaiti society experienced by Dahlia, the main female character in *The Pact We Made*. This study aims to examine how oppression Dahlia experienced as a Kuwaiti woman and what are the differences between her modern life and her family's conservative traditional life. The researchers used a qualitative descriptive method to conduct this research. Primary data used in this study is a novel entitled *The Pact We Made* by Layla Alammam, while secondary data is another source related to research objectives. The researcher applies the theory of standpoint feminism by Sandra Harding and Nancy Hartsock and the concept of oppression by Iris Marion Young to show what form of oppression through the lens of standpoint feminism are experienced by the main character in this book. The results of the research show that the oppression experienced by Dahlia is a type of powerlessness and cultural imperialism. This is shown by Dahlia who is not allowed to make her own choices and feels unable to go against the traditional rules of her parents and Kuwait society which is still strong with a patriarchal culture that underestimates women.*

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1. Introduction

Oppression is defined as injustice in which groups of people are systematically and unfairly restrained, burdened, or reduced by one or more causes. According to Young (2022), oppression occurs when people make other people less human. It could imply treating them inhumanely and limiting individuals' language, education, and other possibilities that could lead to their being less than completely human in both mind and body (Simanjuntak et al., 2021; Andini et al., 2022). Oppression is a system made up of forces, barriers, and controls (Jose, 2021). Women frequently experience oppression. The oppression of women is not something new. Patriarchal societies are frequently blamed for the oppression of women. A male-dominated culture is one in which women are seen primarily as objects for men to use. As a result of men's superior power, women are relatively neglected. Many social organizations, such as churches, families, and schools, recognize and defend this dynamic (Prajnandhari, 2020). In a patriarchal culture, men are prioritized at all times, and women are assigned to a subordinate role. Women are particularly affected by sexism because of their disadvantageous social position (Halizza & Suryani, 2022; Andini, 2017; Rahman, 2018).

Women's oppression is a common theme in literature. The novel *The Pact We Made* is one example of a work of literature that depicts oppression. Author Layla Al Ammar penned this story back in 1985. Dahlia is the main character of this novel. Dahlia is living two lives. In one, she is a young lady with a good career, great friends, and an active social life. In the other, she is an unmarried daughter who lives at home and is dealing with a growing anxiety problem as well as a deeply concealed secret: a violent betrayal that is too humiliating to share. As her thirtieth birthday approaches, her mother's pressure to accept a marriage proposal begins to strain the family. As her two lives begin to collide and shatter, all Dahlia can think about is getting away, which seems impossible given that she can not even leave the country without her father's permission.

This novel portrays women facing oppression since they are seen as a creature who cannot make their own decisions, must marry, and must follow their family's traditions in the Arab conservative culture. It did not matter how successful the girls were; if they could not live up to their family's expectations about marriage and all its traditions, they would be labeled as immature. This limits women's ability to pursue their desires. In this culture, these women are considered as having little choice but to obey their family's customs, even if it is against their desire.

It is important to consider how prior researchers studied women oppression in literary works. Therefore, the researchers of this study highlight three previous research related to the corpus and the relevant topic research. The first research was conducted by Emanuela Buscemi entitled *The Pact(s): Identity, Gender, and Social Order in Kuwaiti Literature*. The aim of Buscemi's research is to examine how Gulf linguistic and social identities are represented in contemporary literary work portrayed by the Kuwaiti characters in Layla Alammar's *The Pact We Made* novel. Buscemi analyzes the shifting linguistic identities depicted in the novel through the use of translingual practice and the ways that characters adapt their language to suit their audience. The second research had been carried out by Idris et al. (2018) entitled *Depiction of Women as the Primary Architects of their own Oppression: A Masculinist Critique of El Saadawi's "Woman at Point Zero"*. The research aims to analyze the way in which Nawal El Saadawi's work, *Woman at Point Zero*, depicts women's oppression and freedom. Specifically, the researchers examine the oppression experienced by Firdaus at the hands of both males and other females and how Firdaus achieved a period of freedom. The third article of research was undertaken by Muhammad Youssef Suwaed (2017) entitled *Exploitation of Women and Social Change in the Writing of Nawal El-Saadawi*. This article focuses on how Arab women are subjected to oppression and exploitation in the form of sexual oppression, sexual exploitation, gender discrimination, social inferiority, and rape.

This research adopts the three previous researches mentioned above. To make a visible distinction from the mentioned researches, the researchers of this research focus on the portrayal of woman's oppression, specifically experienced by the main character of *The Pact We Made*. The issue of women's oppression in this novel has not been examined yet. Therefore, the researchers deal with such issue. In this sense, the researchers use the first previously mentioned research to find its gap in the novel and use the two last previously mentioned researches as the concept and theoretical framework to see how women's oppression is portrayed through the main character.

By working within standpoint feminism by Sandra Harding and Nancy Hartsock and the concept of oppression by Iris Young, this research attempts to examine what the form of oppression experienced by Dahlia is and to focus on how different modern life that Dahlia lives in with her family in Kuwaiti conservative traditional society. The standpoint feminism theory developed by Nancy Hartsock and Sandra Harding was utilized in this research project. Harding coined the term standpoint theory to categorize epistemologies that emphasize women's knowledge (Gurung, 2020). Then, in the middle of the 1980s, she published a book entitled *The Science Question in Feminism*, in which she established the standpoint theory, also known as perspective epistemology, as a branch of feminist analysis.

According to the standpoint feminist theory, one of the most effective ways to learn how the world functions is to begin one's research by considering the world from the point of view of women and other members of society who are on the marginalized group. According to what Harding has stated, "when people speak from the opposite sides of power relations, the perspective from the lives of the less powerful can provide a more objective view than the perspective from the lives of the more powerful." (Steiner, 2014). Since this theory examines the issue from the perspective of women as the oppressed victims of society, it will provide a more objective and empirical analysis of how women in *The Pact We Made* are attempting to gain their own freedom.

2. Methodology

In order to compile this study, the researcher used a qualitative descriptive for the method. The qualitative descriptive approach demands the researcher to carefully record the data that is represented in words and phrases based on what is read, as well as be able to summarize the data facts from the source material then followed by analysis (Saragih & Simanjuntak, 2022). The primary data used in this study is a novel entitled *The Pact We Made* by Layla Alammar, while the secondary data is another source related to research objectives. The research will focus on Dahlia, the main character who has difficulty making choices about her own life.

To look deeper into analysis, an approach relating to feminism and women oppression must be used to assess what the main character goes through. Therefore, the researcher adopts the theory of standpoint feminism by Sandra Harding and Nancy Hartsock and the concept of oppression by Iris Marion Young. According to standpoint feminism theory, women are constantly viewed as class subjectivities who are inferior to men, and they can only fight for their own justice from a masculine perspectives (Steiner, 2014). Furthermore, in the concept of oppression, Young divides oppression into five types, namely violence, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism (Heldke & O'Connor, 2004). In investigating the problem, this theory will enable the researcher to understand what oppression through the lens of standpoint feminism that was experienced by Dahlia, the main character in the novel that will be analyzed.

3. Result and Discussion

By using the concept of oppression and standpoint feminism theory, the researchers have examined how women's oppression is described through the lens of standpoint feminism, especially that experienced by Dahlia, the main character in the novel *The Pact We Made*. The result shows that Dahlia's oppression is a mix of powerlessness and cultural imperialism. The powerlessness experienced by Dahlia is shown by her not being able to make her own choices and feeling unable to go against the customary rules of her parents and society, despite the fact that she is considered an adult. Meanwhile, cultural imperialism is shown by Dahlia who has to deal with a strong patriarchal culture that demands that women serve men and stereotypes that she is not a good woman because she is not married at the age of 30. Dahlia grew up in Kuwait in an extremely traditional Arab family or culture, and as a result, she was oppressed and got permanently enmeshed in that strict society. Women are subjugated or marginalized in a country where Kuwaiti or Arab culture is still dominant, as in the case of Dahlia.

a. Dahlia's Types of Oppression

The term "oppression" refers to the forcing of one's will by a powerful group. However, oppression also leads to injustice in other situations. Iris Marion Young identifies five "faces" or forms of oppression: violence, economic exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism. Dahlia's oppression in the novel *The Pact We Made* comes from a combination of cultural imperialism and powerlessness.

The first is powerlessness. Some people "have" power while others "have-not," and this dichotomy is crucial to Marx's notion of socialism. Those without power are positioned to follow the ruling class's lead but have little say in decision-making (Young, 2022).

"I would make my decision based on their voices. Nothing more... Pausing just around the corner, I would wait for the man to speak, and then I'd make my judgment." - *The Pact We Made* p.49

From the example of expression above, it can be seen that Dahlia does not have the power to decide things on her own. Despite being an adult who should be able to make her own choices, Dahlia in the story feels unable to go against the traditional rules of her parents and society. Consider her job as an example. Dahlia works in finance not because she wants to, but because her family insisted she do so. Dahlia felt like she had no control over anything, including her own body, due to her parents' constant demands. Thus, Dahlia went and got a tattoo on her hand as a form of "rebellion" against this. The inability to grow one's skills and abilities, the inability to make one's own decisions, and the vulnerability to disrespectful treatment due to one's lowered status are just a few of the fundamental injustices that come along with being powerless (Shlasko, 2015). Therefore, Dahlia lacks the ability to handle her own matters and is labeled as such. As a single woman in her thirties (according to family tradition, women are expected to get married by the time they turn 30), Dahlia has little choice but to follow her parents' wishes.

Raising one's level of awareness is the only effective weapon in the struggle against powerlessness. Through education, literacy, and introspection, the oppressed have improved their understanding of themselves and the world around them. Oppressed people are able finally to break away from indoctrination and physical oppression by using their voices and developing a critical perspective of their oppressors (Young, 2022). Because Dahlia already knows that she was indeed oppressed, Dahlia starts to feel desperate for freedom, and ultimately attempts to rebel against her parents as they begin searching for a spouse for her. Instead, Dahlia decided to follow her boss to New York and serve as his second wife there. She had no choice but to agree to become a second wife if Dahlia ever wanted to break free from her parents' oppression.

The second is cultural imperialism. During a period of cultural imperialism, the dominant culture is adopted and established across the whole population. Those with influence in a society determine the norms for how its people interpret and express themselves. Therefore, the most widely spread views of that society express the experience, values, ambitions, and accomplishments of these groups. Dahlia was born and raised in a very conservative Arab family or culture in Kuwait, who despise the status of unmarried women and also view women as 'servants' for men. As a result, she has become oppressed and permanently entangled in that strict society.

Those who are oppressed due to cultural imperialism are branded with negative stereotypes and denied any sense of power. They are limited in who and what they can be due to the limitations imposed by the stereotypes (Young, 2022). Dahlia, too, was affected by negative stereotypes since she was a single woman. For instance, she faces heavy patriarchal culture that dictates women must serve men and stereotypes that she is not a decent woman (since she is not married by the age of 30). Also, Dahlia was unable to report or name the harasser because doing so would have

brought disgrace upon her and her family, based on traditional notions about the victimization of women who experience sexual harassment in her conservative environment. However, the same stereotypes also reduce these people to a faceless collective, where no one stands out. Dahlia's loss of her sense of self as an adult was a direct result of the pressure she was put under by societal expectations that women should conform to narrow roles. She is torn between her modern background and her conservative, oppressive family.

b. Between Freedom and Family

The *Pact We Made* novel tells a story of a Kuwaiti woman named Dahlia who is an unmarried lady and approaching her thirtieth birthday and lives in modern life with her family in a highly Kuwaiti tradition which is conservative Arab society. The age of thirty is the age of Kuwaiti women from good families who are usually over their prime marrying years, and Dahlia is still not married yet in the 30th. Dahlia's mother has been looking for a husband for her for ten years, but Dahlia always declines to marry a man who does not arouse her desire and shows no interest in the men introduced by her mother. In this sense, Dahlia is suffering from mother's pressure to accept a marriage proposal and from cultural expectations around marriageability.

The idea that a woman's role and primary life path is to get married and have children is at the center of this novel, and Dahlia is fighting against it. Dahlia feels restricted and trapped in such a culture where honor and appearance are valued more highly than the person. This case is clearly depicted when the narrator itself stated as in the following expression:

"How could I explain that nothing in my life felt real? That in a country like Kuwait, where everyone knows everything about each other, the most monumental thing to ever happen to me was buried and covered over? For the sake of my reputation, my future, my sister's and cousins; the family honour sat on my little shoulders, so no-one could ever know."

The researchers of this study gain a clear understanding of how traditional society of Kuwait contributes to present-day women's struggle in dealing with the conservative society. Living in a traditional Arab society, in general, and Kuwait cultural society, in particular, place women in subordinate or marginal gender roles. Women were regarded as weak and inferior to men who were perceived as having superior intelligence and physical strength (French, 1992; Wehbi, 2021). Therefore, the researchers recognized that the author of the novel had explored the traditional Kuwait society through the Dahlia's family.

The traditional culture of Kuwait in Dahlia's family can be seen in several actions and expressions within the novel. One of the actions is the time when Dahlia's mother brought Dahlia to a traditional matchmaker to gain a stranger's suggested husband. In such a case Dahlia's mother seems to regard Dahlia as if she were a woman who could not find her own partner. As a result, the right to seek a future husband is restricted by the mother, and Dahlia then has no right to look for a partner based on her proper criteria. More than that, Dahlia's mother limits Dahlia's ability to form friendships. The mother emphasizes that man and woman cannot be friends. Therefore, Dahlia feels cut apart from society. Dahlia wants to leave her supposedly perfect family and pursue a life of her own choosing. Dahlia, however, is unable to leave the country without her father's consent.

As Dahlia journeys in the story of the novel, Dahlia is forced to make a decision between staying with her family, which implies being reliant on patriarchal structures, and choosing freedom, which is obviously not going to be simple because of the obstacles in her path. In this way, Dahlia lives in two different worlds: one where she lives in a traditional conservative Kuwait society, and she is a modern woman living in a contemporary city.

Along the way, the researchers of this study also recognize numerous aspects of Dahlia's life in contemporary Kuwait. They can be seen when Dahlia mentions parties with her friends, the sense of fashion or stylishness, the convenience store, and Dahlia's hobby related to art activities. Viewed in this way, it is clear that such aspects are evident for both young women and others living in modern Kuwait.

The *Pact We Made* is a truly fascinating novel in looking at a way of life where traditional conservative society and modern living are in conflict. The story takes place in Kuwait and covers a wide range of topics, including the problems faced by women in these kinds of communities as well as traditional and modern cultures. At the end of the novel Dahlia decides to move to New York in order to study. In that sense, Dahlia's important choice will either set her free, or she may do so by making an effort to escape Kuwait's restrictive social structures around her life. As a result, she leaves her conservative family and prefers to choose freedom over her family.

4. Conclusion

The behavior of oppression towards women occurs as a result of many patriarchal cultures that underestimate women. Women are frequently viewed as beings who are incapable of making their own decisions, must marry, and must follow their family's traditions. This study observes the oppression experienced by Dahlia, the main female character in *The Pact We Made*. This study aims to investigate the types of oppression Dahlia encountered and emphasizes the differences between Dahlia's modern life and that of her family in Kuwait's traditional conservative culture. Dahlia is shown as a character who appears to lead two lives. On the one hand, she is a successful lady who enjoys socializing with others. On the other side, she is an unmarried, socially constrained daughter of a Kuwaiti family. This research found that Dahlia's oppression was a type of powerlessness and cultural imperialism, where she could not make her own choices and was limited by her family or Kuwait's extremely traditional Arab culture. In this culture, these women are perceived as having no choice but to follow their family's traditions, even if they don't agree with them. Furthermore, Dahlia also feels constrained by the several traditional Kuwaiti traditions still present in her family, including the need to marry, the prohibition of dating people of the opposite sex, and the have to live with her family who still adhere to the patriarchal system. All of these things are different from her modern life, which contrasts with the culture of her family which restricts a woman's freedom to follow her wants.

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