

The Architecture of Submission: Covert Ideological Engineering Through Panoptic Surveillance and Interpellation in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*

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Abstract

This paper investigates how women's identities are gradually transformed and manipulated at the very beginning of their lives in the post-colonial Egyptian era under intersecting power structures through the character Firdaus in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, drawing on Foucauldian ideas of the panopticon and Althusserian concepts of interpellation. The purpose of this paper is to unmask the covert mechanisms of patriarchal power and state authority in shaping and regulating women's behaviours. It also analyses how social institutions, such as educational and religious institutions, operate as ISAs and RSAs to endorse and inject stereotypical ideas into women. Implementing a qualitative approach through intensive textual analysis, this study identifies themes of surveillance, discipline, and ideological interpellation with the help of multiple feminist and postcolonial scholarship. The study identifies the very process of domestication of women's identity through Firdaus. It demonstrates how Firdaus' identity is systematically produced, policed, and censored through familial, religious, educational, legal, and economic institutions. The panoptical gaze transforms Firdaus into a 'docile body', who hailed patriarchal norms as a daughter, wife, prostitute, and a prisoner in a panoptic world until the end. It focuses on the hidden process of ideological apparatuses by linking Foucauldian and Althusserian theories to showcase how female subjection is sustained in a postcolonial context and how ideology is partly responsible for engineering female subjectivity in a subtle but effective process.

Keywords: Panopticon, Docile Bodies, Micro Power, Interpellation, ISA, RSA.

Introduction

Nawal El Saadawi's (2015) fiction *Woman at Point Zero* displays the poor condition of postcolonial Egyptian women through the protagonist of the novel, Firdaus. Firdaus' identity was continuously shaped and moulded by the androcentric system through ideological apparatuses. However, instead of merely focusing on an individual's experience, Saadawi investigates how the long-embedded historical systems of gendered hierarchy operate and contribute to structuring women's lives in post-colonial Egypt. Additionally, many historical scholarship regarding gender governance in Egyptian society exposes the framework that the state uses to control women's emancipation, which is also discussed briefly below. This research paper investigates how that very emancipation is reinforced by

legal and religious institutions, which ensure patriarchal norms (Hatem, 1992). By synthesising both theories of Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault, the study demonstrates how the production of docile bodies is not only a continuous process but also difficult to eliminate.

Firdaus' continual subjection to institutional dominion substantiates her to a state of oppression that is regulated by a normalized system of power (Saadawi, 2015). Such exposure to institutional regulation does not only showcase the constrained identity of Firdaus, but also propagates the multiple negotiated identities as she assumes. Her life trajectory from obedient daughter to submissive wife, compliant subject of the state, and commodified object of male desire explains the fragmentation of an identity constructed by shifting positions of power; as Hall and du Guy (2011) contend, these shifts accentuate that Identity is a site of constant negotiation; it is fragmented and continuously in the process of change and transformation. Therefore, the constitution and reconstitution of Firdaus' identity confirm the instability of her identity under patriarchal and ideological dominion.

Existing studies have predominantly focused on feminist readings of *Woman at Point Zero*, for example, the essentialist role of religion and FGM (Rather, 2024), existential feminism in Firdaus' identity (Alqaryouti, 2024), and radical and feminist perspectives identifying the resistance of Firdaus (Irmayani et al., 2024). While these studies foreground gendered oppression, their analysis remains largely thematic, and none of them sufficiently interrogates the structural mechanisms by which domination is sustained and internalised. The interlocking operation of ideology and surveillance, which invisibly compels women to engage in self-monitoring and the reproduction of patriarchal norms, has received less attention.

This study intends to unravel the covert operations of state power and patriarchy that propagate Firdaus' subjectivity in postcolonial Egypt. Within the framework of Foucauldian and Althusserian theories, the research investigates the following research question:

- How does Foucauldian surveillance manifest in Firdaus' life and contribute to her becoming a 'docile body'?
- How do Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) confirm gender norms and interpellated ideologies against the backdrop of patriarchal discourse in the post-colonial context?
- How does the fear of powerlessness reinforce these apparatuses, and how do the patriarchal institutions assume power by shaping identity, leading individuals to internalise and reproduce patriarchal norms as part of their identity?

The convergence of structuralist Marxist theory and the disciplinary power of surveillance studies contributes to revealing a new dimension of patriarchal sustenance in the framework of internalized regulation and self-disciplinary practices. This would definitely raise the consciousness of female identity formation.

Materials and Methods

The researchers employed a qualitative approach to Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, using thematic coding to examine how female subjectivity is formed. The researchers examined the representations, power dynamics, and the ways a discourse of subjectivity is constructed through the lens of Foucauldian panoptic surveillance and Althusserian interpellation. The novel, *Woman at point zero* by Nawal El Saadawi, specifically the Zed Books English translation by Sherif Hetata (2015 edition) is the primary source of data collection, while secondary sources included peer-reviewed scholarship in feminist theory, postcolonial studies, surveillance studies, psychoanalysis, and Marxist structuralism. All textual references were cited with page numbers from this edition for traceability. Qualitative textual analysis was selected due to the paper's focus on discursive representations, ideological mechanisms, and power relations rather than quantifiable variables. Textual passages were selected through purposive sampling and based on their relevance to surveillance, ideological conditioning, and subject formation. The included passages met the following criteria of institutional surveillance, ideological hailing, disciplinary power, bodily regulation, punishment, and normalisation. Passages that did not meet or contribute to the analysis of identity formation or disciplinary structures were omitted to maintain conceptual focus. The analysis followed a three-stage coding process. Initially, through open coding, the novel was comprehensively studied to identify concepts, metaphors, actions, and discursive patterns related to power, obedience, fear, surveillance, bodily discipline, sexuality, and resistance. These related codes were then categorised to establish theoretical frameworks. Codes such as fear, visibility, and monitoring were grouped into broader analytical categories of panoptic surveillance, while family discipline, religious morality, and educational restriction were grouped under ideological interpellation. Finally, these categories were combined into primary themes, including panoptic surveillance across social institutions, ideological interpellation via ISAs, and repressive enforcement through RSAs. Each of the themes was mapped onto Foucauldian and Althusserian theoretical frameworks to interpret how disciplinary power and ideology operate in tandem. In order to enhance interpretive rigour and reduce subjective bias, the researchers followed an iterative close reading for the refinement and verification of codes and themes and cross-verified with established scholarship with textual evidence and theoretical principles, and ensured interpretive accuracy. Reflexivity was maintained by acknowledging that the study is more interpretive and theory-driven rather than empirical, as most qualitative textual analyses. However, the analysis is only limited to *Woman at Point Zero* and does not generalise to other post-colonial or feminist texts. Furthermore, the use of theory-driven coding may accentuate certain themes over others, reflecting a theoretical rather than psychological or historical focus.

Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

Feminist and Postcolonial Reading

Scholarly engagement with *Woman at Point Zero* has foregrounded Firdaus within the context of the subjugation of postcolonial women. Recent postcolonial feminist studies underscore Firdaus' embodiment of a patriarchal struggle that intersects with colonial history and power dynamics of Egypt (Kök & Bakırtaş, 2024). Positioned within a postcolonial framework reminiscent of Fanon et al.'s (1963) discourse on the continuum of colonial legacies maintained by the postcolonial national bourgeoisie, which creates an alienated 'other'. Recent studies extend this to a gendered context, wherein oligarchic patriarchal superiors construct women as inferior beings (Eze, 2023). Saadawi also exposes the parallel process of patriarchal structuring, where colonial legacies generate values and norms that are passed across generations to marginalise and undermine women within an exploitative system (Gohar, 2016).

Feminist Existentialism and Intersectional Approaches

The Second Sex, by Beauvoir (1953), further clarifies the patriarchal framework by identifying women as 'the Other', who are denied transcendence because of social discourse, economic subjugation, and political subordination (p.206). This existentialist lens is visible in Firdaus' formation of subjectivity, which is persistently denied by male-defined roles, reducing her into objecthood (Alqaryouti, 2024).

This feminist theoretical understanding expands to encompass the layered nature of Firdaus' oppression from the perspective of intersectionality. El Saadawi demonstrates how multiple forces from various power-holding individuals oppress women in a multiplicative fashion. Intersectional identities of women created by powerhouse agencies stratified the role of women, such as obedient daughters, faithful wives, caring mothers, law-abiding workers, and docile prostitutes (Balaa, 2018). Tugume (2021) showcases how binary gender construction confirms the position of man as agent and woman as a morally suspecting body, often sexualized and criminalised. This purview explains the multiplicative nature of oppression and exploitation, except for showing the internalisation process and self-reproduction of norms.

Feminist Surveillance Studies and Literary Panopticism

Emerging scholarship in surveillance studies portrays the understanding of women's domination in the patriarchal realm. This field critiques the surveillance regimes of disproportionate surveillance practices with respect to gender, race, and class (Gill, 2019). In the patriarchal world, the panoptic mechanism shapes women's identity through moral, cultural, and behavioural expectations. Disciplinary institutions, such as familial, religious, or digital ones, force women to internalise existing social norms. This results in self-regulation, particularly regarding their appearance, sexuality, and public behaviour (Isser et al., 2024). Ghorbanpour and Sabbagh (2024) emphasise that Firdaus subjectivity is both constrained and produced by this panoptic mechanism. Discipline and punishment

mechanisms lead her to internalise fear and social norms. Thus, women's individual experiences from childhood to adulthood exhibit broader patriarchal-moulded social patterns, where women are denied agency (Fwangyil, 2012).

Existing studies have examined various aspects of *Woman at Point Zero*, including postcolonial feminism, feminist existentialism, intersectionality, and feminist surveillance. Most of the studies emphasise postcolonial domination, gendered oppression, or disciplinary surveillance, yet rarely do any of these unearth the mechanisms that simultaneously contribute to constructing or regulating women's identity. Although the Foucauldian power structure has been employed to understand the gendered nature of oppression, its relation to ISA and RSA remains theoretically underdeveloped in the context of *Woman at Point Zero*. There is also limited critical attention to the process of postcolonial multiple layers of identity erosion by the apparatuses as the medium of the panopticon. Therefore, this paper employs Louis Althusser's ISAs and RSAs alongside Michel Foucault's panopticon for dissecting the mechanism of the superstructure for the formation of postcolonial womanhood.

Louis Althusser's Ideology and Interpellation

Louis Althusser, the structuralist Marxist, in his essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', asserts how individuals see themselves and the social world. Althusser (2006) posits that 'ideology is the system of ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group' (p. 26). Ideology interpellates its agenda by hailing or calling out the individual. In this way, ideology creates or reproduces social roles that are necessary for the functioning of a society. In *Woman at Point Zero*, it is clearly visible how the protagonist Firdaus' existence has been interpellated as well as navigated by Ideological State Apparatuses. Her subjectivity is constantly shaped by patriarchal social norms (Narimawati et al., 2023) and disciplined by internalizing social norms imposed through family, religion, education, law, and media.

Foucault's Panopticon

The panopticon, initially proposed by Jeremy Bentham as a prison model, underscores constant surveillance to encourage self-regulation (Wrobel, 2025). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1995) displays the restricted role of an individual under surveillance. He emphasises that an individual will be punished if they break the rules because the subjects live in a place that is segmented, immobile, and frozen. Each individual is fixed in their place, and if he moves, he does so at the risk of his life, contagion or punishment. Asserting dominance in the name of discipline, the authoritarian body objectifies an individual and uses that individual as a tool to exercise that very power (pp. 195–202). Disciplinary punishment articulated by decentralized micro-power renders each individual a docile body. This micro-power navigates through the vessels of Ideological as well as repressive apparatuses. In Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, 'inspection functions ceaselessly' through

the presence of micro-power. To monitor every step of Firdaus, 'the gaze is alert everywhere' (Foucault, 1995, p. 195).

Findings

Family Surveillance and Female Subjectivity

Firdaus' childhood is marked by continuous family monitoring. She recalls that even when out of sight, 'they were the eyes that watched me... and followed me wherever I went' (Saadawi, 2015, p.15). This excerpt shows that her parents' gaze was acting as a constant panoptic force, watching over her every step with relentless captiousness. In practical terms, every aspect of Firdaus' life was controlled by the authority of her family, training her to comply unconditionally. These narratives consistently show how her identity was rendered docile and how her own family operates as an all-encompassing ideological apparatus that pre-defines Firdaus' role as a submissive daughter.

Bio-Power and the Violation of the Domestic Sphere

Saadawi clearly describes how female sexuality is medically and culturally regulated. After Firdaus undergoes female circumcision, she describes how she was in pain and mentions that the pleasure was 'gone and would never return' (Saadawi, 2015, p.13). This loss of bodily autonomy indicates how Firdaus was never in control of her body. Throughout the narrative, Firdaus internalises this lesson as she comes to view her own sexuality as disgraceful and dangerous to society. Firdaus was also subject to covert gaze and abusive touching from her uncle, as well as she remembers, 'His hand moving slowly from behind the book he was reading to touch my leg. The next moment I could feel it travelling up my thigh with a cautious, stealthy, trembling movement' (Saadawi, 2015, p.13). This embodies the control and exploitation by her own family, who invaded her privacy and enforced compliance through hidden and predatory observation. The FGM and subtle domination were the first line of fortification of being an object of male desire, preparing her to deny her own needs.

Religious and Educational Apparatus

The novel also exposes how the concealed indoctrination of religious and educational institutions made Firdaus a subject of society. Firdaus uncovered a nefarious link between religion and patriarchy, as her uncle's wife mentions, 'men well versed in their religion... beat their wives. The precepts of religion permitted such punishment' (Saadawi, 2015, pp.46–47). This excerpt describes how religious ideology is used as a tool to demand women's 'perfect obedience,' legitimising abuse in the name of faith. Likewise, the narrative also shows how education for women is often diverted by patriarchal priorities. Although Firdaus initially attends school, her uncle, who was studying at El Azhar, soon withdraws the financial support and forces her into marriage instead. Firdaus remembers being told by her uncle as a child that 'El Azhar was only for men.' (Saadawi, 2015, p.14).

The educational institutes acted as ideological state apparatuses, co-opted to implement traditional gender roles.

State Surveillance and Repression

In conclusion, the text illustrates how the law and economy acted as repressive extensions of control and abuse towards women. After Firdaus was imprisoned for killing Marzouk in self-defence, she proclaimed, 'I was the only woman who had torn the mask away, and exposed the face of their ugly reality' (Saadawi, 2015, p.110). She was incarcerated for refusing to be a prostitute and was later executed. Throughout her life, the state used economic and legal power to enforce her submission as she was paid inadequately at work, extorted by her pimp, and ultimately condemned to die. This narrative shows how the courts and prison acted as the ultimate enforcers of patriarchy by punishing Firdaus for rejecting subordination.

Discussion

Firdaus' internalisation of her family's gaze demonstrates Michel Foucault's concept of panopticism, where, through external surveillance, subjects of a society are forced into self-policing their behaviour. When Firdaus notes, 'they were the eyes that watched me... and followed me wherever I went' (Saadawi, 2015, p.15), she describes the mechanism of that panopticon and the sensation of being constantly observed, which creates a 'state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power' (Foucault, 1995, p. 201). Firdaus' family functions not only as a domestic organisation here but also as a disciplinary institution that produces a 'docile body,' training Firdaus to govern her own behaviours even in the absence of her parents. Malti-Douglas (1991) argues that the male gaze in Saadawi's work operates as a primary instrument of control, stripping the female subject of agency by reducing her to an object of constant scrutiny and moral judgment. Thus, Firdaus' family works both as an ISA and a mini panopticon that governed Firdaus' behaviour through the ideological hailing, self-surveillance, and self-policing.

Patriarchal Control of Female Sexuality

The bodily regulation that was imposed over Firdaus' body through female genital mutilation (FGM) and sexual exploitation is a key representation of bio-power, where the biological components of the subject are supervised by and for the ruling ideology. Framing menstruation and female sexual pleasure as taboo and dangerous, women are taught to withdraw from pleasure and foster guilt. Cultural narratives also impose a gendered asymmetry of pleasure, as they are also taught that sexual intercourse is only enjoyed by men through women's bodies. The excerpt, 'pleasure was gone and would never return' (Saadawi, 2015, p.13), exemplifies how the patriarchal society uses ideology to control and abuse the female body, effectively severing Firdaus from her own sexual agency. This act of abuse theoretically transforms her into a passive vessel for male desire, rather than an active subject with the ability to choose. Critics such as Yaqoob and Irum (2016) argue that

Firdaus' body becomes a 'site of contestation,' where her identity is systematically dismantled by a society that views female sexual pleasure as a threat to social order, necessitating its surgical removal and subsequent policing. The novel shows that FGM and related traditions are not arbitrary, but function as ideological devices that physically disempower women and force them to accept their given identity made by the patriarchal society.

Religious and Educational Apparatus

The collusion of religious and educational institutions played a somewhat important role in subjugating Firdaus' identity. When Firdaus observes that 'men well versed in their religion... beat their wives' (Saadawi, 2015, pp.46–47), she exposes how the Religious ISA functions as the arbiters of morality to generalise violence and secure consent to the status quo without any need for constant physical force. Similarly, when she was excluded from El Azhar because it was 'only for men' (p.14), it demonstrated how the Educational ISAs are used as tools for indoctrination and reproducing the relations of production. In this case, it is the reproduction of gendered hierarchies. Amal Amireh (2000), Saadawi's critique often centres on how these institutions do not merely reflect patriarchal values but are actively manufacturing them and hailing women into the roles of submission that they are expected to accept as divine or natural law.

State Power and the RSA

The state apparatuses in the novel are the embodiment of what Foucault terms as disciplinary and sovereign power. Foucault shows that law, prisons and bureaucracies invoke surveillance into the society and ensures that disobedience is harshly punished. Firdaus' revelation that she 'tore the mask away' represents the exposing of that ideological illusion, for which the state's response was her execution, which exemplifies the ultimate panoptic sanction, by making an example out of her. The death sentence is not arbitrary, but the predictable outcome when an individual resists the system, as Preciado (2018) suggests, such repression 'obliterates' insurgent subjects. The police, courts and prisons together, acting as RSAs, enforce compliance through fear of force. For instance, the novel shows that the male authorities abuse women with impunity because the laws (legal RSAs) inherently side with husbands and pimps rather than victims, even if they were clearly guilty. Thus, the state's role becomes twofold, where one side secures patriarchal order by economic and legal oppression, and the other eradicates the potential challengers. Firdaus' death sentence is not an aberration but a reasonable outcome of a flawed system, in which RSAs and ISAs collaborate to obliterate women who expose and reject the ideological fiction of their natural subordination (Preciado, 2018; Serisier, 2018). In Foucault's terms, Firdaus' execution is a state spectacle to reinforce obedience through terror. Whether it is viewed as Foucauldian 'capillary' power or Althusserian RSA intervention, the outcome will almost always be the same; the convergence of ISA and RSA means that any female who refuses her "natural" subordination will be erased.

Conclusion

Firdaus' identity was lost between being subservient and being autonomous, being perplexed into internalised surveillance. Firdaus' life illustrates the relentless grip of the ideological constraints and confinement of her identity, exposing the harsh mistreatment from the patriarchal society. Similar to the condition of the woman in contemporary post-colonial society, where women's rights were marginalised due to an orchestrated discourse of religion and power.

This research paper highlights the acute vulnerability of a woman's identity and underscores the need for awareness of the social, political, and cultural norms that shape the process. The research theoretically contributes by integrating Structuralist Marxism and post-structuralist surveillance studies within postcolonial literary criticism. While Althusser provides the framework for understanding how subjects in a society are constituted by their ideology, and Foucault explains the mechanism behind disciplinary power, this study shows that in the postcolonial patriarchal context, the synergy between these two forces is mutually reinforcing. The study implies that true autonomy is never free in a socio-political discourse, but is systematically and carefully constructed based on the necessities of the ruling class and female subjectivity in such contexts is constructed through the 'covert' collaboration of both the domestic sphere and state control.

The study is limited to a single novel and to Althusserian-Foucauldian tools, which limits the generalizability of the findings to broader postcolonial or Egyptian literary traditions. Psychoanalytic or materialist-feminist approaches might uncover additional strata. Additionally, the reliance upon the translated version of Sherif Hetata may obscure the linguistic nuances present in the original Arabic text. Future research on this matter can extend this framework through a comparative analysis of other postcolonial Arab women writers to determine if female subjectivity is present across genres. Researchers could also investigate contemporary 'Virtual panopticons', such as social media and cyber-policing of women and also transgender and non-binary subjects in post-colonial fiction, to analyse whether they are responsible for regulating behaviours of women in the digital age. Nevertheless, the findings have clear implications for both literary and political scholarship and as long as RSAs and ISAs continue to converge and work together, defiance remains among the most potent tools for denaturalising the patriarchal power and imagining alternative subjectivities.

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