Ijtimaiya : Journal of Social Science and Teaching
https://journal.iainkudus.ac.id/index.php/Ijtimaia
E-ISSN: 2720-9245
Vol. 10 No. 1, 2026 | 81 – 102
10.21043/ji.v10i1. 36992

Oppression of Kurdish Women: Between Patriarchy and Social Inequality

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of oppression against Kurdish women in *Honor, Daughters of Smoke and Fire,* and *Dahlia and Carys*. It explores how patriarchy and social inequality intersect in shaping Kurdish women's experiences as subaltern subjects. The study applies a qualitative descriptive and library research approach, using postcolonialism and intersectional feminism as analytical frameworks. The findings show that Kurdish women experience multiple forms of oppression, including language restriction, ethnic marginalization, subordination within family and society, double burdens in domestic and public spheres, honor-based violence, gender-biased moral interpretations, and racism. The article argues that these oppressions are not solely rooted in local culture but emerge from the intersection of patriarchy, migration, class inequality, ethnic discrimination, and postcolonial legacies. Literature therefore functions as a medium of social criticism that exposes systems of domination over Kurdish women's bodies and identities.

Keywords: oppression; patriarchy; social inequality; postcolonialism; intersectionality

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji representasi penindasan terhadap perempuan Kurdi dalam Honor, Daughters of Smoke and Fire, dan Dahlia and Carys. Artikel ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana patriarki dan ketimpangan sosial saling beririsan dalam membentuk pengalaman perempuan Kurdi sebagai subjek subaltern. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif dan metode studi pustaka, dengan teori poskolonialisme dan feminisme interseksional sebagai kerangka analisis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa perempuan Kurdi mengalami berbagai bentuk penindasan, termasuk pembatasan bahasa, marginalisasi etnis, subordinasi dalam keluarga dan masyarakat, beban ganda di ranah domestik dan publik, kekerasan berbasis kehormatan, interpretasi moral yang bias gender, serta rasisme. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa penindasan tersebut tidak semata-mata berakar pada budaya lokal, melainkan muncul dari persinggungan patriarki, migrasi, ketimpangan kelas, diskriminasi etnis, dan warisan poskolonial. Oleh karena itu, sastra berfungsi sebagai media kritik sosial yang mengungkap sistem dominasi terhadap tubuh dan identitas perempuan Kurdi.

Kata kunci: *penindasan**;** patriarki; ketimpangan sosial; poskolonialisme; interseksionalitas*

A. Introduction

The Kurds are a stateless nation with the largest population in the world today. In 2021, the Kurdish population was estimated at 34 million people, most of whom live along the borders of four countries: Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria (McDowall, 2021). The fall of the Ottoman Empire after World War I caused the territories inhabited by the Kurds to come under British control. The British colonial government, which had initially promised independence to the Kurds, instead divided Kurdistan into four countries, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, through the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne (Hapsari, 2019). As a minority group in those four countries, the Kurds have often experienced oppression, discrimination, and injustice, which have driven them to carry out numerous rebellions that have worsened instability in the Middle East (Misiągiewicz, 2013).

In addition, Kurdish society is also known for having a strongly patriarchal culture (Shakiba et al., 2021). Patriarchy is a social structure and practice that places men in a dominant position, causing women to experience subordination, oppression, and exploitation (Walby, 1991). Kurdish women live within a complex historical situation. They face not only patriarchy within the family and community, but also ethnic marginalization, state violence, and racism in diasporic spaces. These experiences place Kurdish women in a vulnerable position because the various forms of injustice they face do not operate separately but are deeply intertwined. In this context, the researcher seeks

to examine this phenomenon through literary works. Literature is important to read not merely as a mirror of reality but as a space that records how power relations are built, negotiated, and questioned.

The literary works examined in this study are three novels by women writers associated with Kurdish issues: *Honor* by Elif Shafak, *Daughters of Smoke and Fire* by Ava Homa, *and Dahlia and Carys* by Hastie Salih. These three novels are highly compelling because they depict how Kurdish women, on the one hand, confront local patriarchy that oppresses them and, on the other hand, become victims of broader social structures in the form of state policies (Turkey, Iran, and Iraq) that limit their rights as a minority and commit violence against them. In addition, the female characters in all three novels eventually become immigrants who live in diaspora in Western countries (Britain and Canada), so they also have to face racial stereotypes in the new countries where they live.

The suffering experienced by Kurdish women is caused not only by patriarchy but also by social inequality formed by a variety of factors. Social inequality is the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and social positions in society so that certain groups experience limited access because their positions are more vulnerable than those of other groups (Otte et al., 2021). Therefore, the oppression of Kurdish women needs to be read as a layered social problem. To understand this situation, this article uses a postcolonial and intersectional framework.

Postcolonialism refers to the practice of coloniality that continues to operate after formal colonialism has ended (Said, 1979). Quijano emphasizes that the coloniality of power survives through racial classification, the division of labor, and hierarchies of knowledge that position certain groups as inferior (Quijano, 2000). Meanwhile, Crenshaw argues that women's experiences of injustice cannot be explained through a single identity, because gender always intersects with race, ethnicity, class, religion, and citizenship (Crenshaw, 1991). In addition, Collins's concept of the domain of power is used to see how power relations operate in structural, disciplinary, cultural, and interpersonal spheres (Collins, 2000). These three perspectives are relevant for reading Kurdish women, who simultaneously experience subordination as women and marginalization as an ethnic group.

Based on these issues, the research questions in this article are: 1) How do the novels *Honor, Daughters of Smoke and Fire, and Dahlia and Carys* represent the oppression of Kurdish women? and 2) How do patriarchy and social inequality shape their experiences? The aim of this study is to explain the forms of oppression that appear in the three novels and to interpret their socio-historical roots through postcolonial and intersectional perspectives. Theoretically, this article is expected to strengthen the reading

of literature as a field of social criticism. Practically, this article shows that discussions of Kurdish women must take into account the contexts of ethnicity, class, state, and diaspora, rather than simply blaming local culture.

A number of previous studies have discussed Kurdish women from the perspectives of sociology, gender, and human rights. Bengio highlights Kurdish women's struggles in the context of nation-building (Bengio, 2014). Bayram and Sakarya show that language barriers make Kurdish women more vulnerable in accessing health services (Bayram & Sakarya, 2023). While Turgut and Çelik demonstrate how stigma against Kurdish students is reproduced within educational settings in Turkey (Turgut & Çelik, 2024). Nevertheless, these studies generally draw on empirical social data and have not fully highlighted how such layered experiences are represented in contemporary literature. This is where the importance of this article lies, because literary works enable a more intimate reading of Kurdish women's affective experiences. By reading the novel as an archive of social experience, this article seeks to bring together literary criticism with social analysis concerning the marginalization of Kurdish women. In addition, research on Kurdish literature and culture has never previously been conducted in Indonesia, so this study is expected to make a novel contribution to Indonesian scholarship.

B. Method

This study is a descriptive qualitative study employing a library research method. The primary data consist of narrative units in the three novels, including dialogue, character descriptions, and events that reveal the experiences of Kurdish women. The secondary data were obtained from books and scholarly articles related to postcolonialism, patriarchy, and other issues in Kurdish society. Data were collected through close reading, quotation note-taking, and the classification of forms of oppression. The analysis was conducted interpretively in several stages. First, the data were read as literary representations of Kurdish women's social experiences. Second, relevant quotations were mapped into main clusters/themes. Third, each theme was interpreted through the framework of the coloniality of power and intersectionality in order to reveal the relationship between the characters' personal experiences and broader social structures. In this way, the article does not stop at plot description but places the novels as texts that reveal the operation of power in Kurdish women's lives.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Brief Synopsis of the Novels Honor, Daughters of Smoke and Fire, and Dahlia and Carys

Elif Shafak's novel *Honor* tells the story of three generations of the Toprak family from Turkish Kurdistan. The story centers on the tragedy of Pembe's murder by her own son, Iskander, driven by the logic of family "honor." Through flashbacks, the novel shows that violence against women does not appear suddenly but is rooted in a patriarchal value

system passed down from generation to generation. From Naze's life in her remote village in Turkish Kurdistan to Pembe's marriage and migration to London, Kurdish women continue to experience oppression. In diasporic space, that oppression does not disappear; it merely changes form. Pembe continues to live in loneliness, alienation, and cultural pressure. Her unhappy marriage led her into an extramarital relationship that cost her life; she was killed by his son to clean the family's honor (Shafak, 2013). Through a non-linear plot and diverse points of view (Esma, Jamila, Hediye, and many other female characters), the novel criticizes patriarchy and the social inequality experienced by Kurdish women in Turkey. Elif Shafak, the author of this novel, is a Turkish woman writer who has written extensively on Kurdish issues. She currently lives in the United States as a writer and lecturer. She is also a board member of the Royal Society of Literature (RSL) and the recipient of various international awards such as the Costa Award, the British Book Awards, and BBC Most Inspiring and Influential Women 2021.

Meanwhile, Ava Homa's novel *Daughters of Smoke and Fire* depicts, through the character of Leila, how the life of a Kurdish family in Iran is shaped by state violence, political trauma, poverty, and systemic discrimination. Leila grows up in a family overshadowed by the wounds of her father's past as a former political prisoner whose torture left him disabled, forcing her mother to become the family's main breadwinner. In the midst of this situation, Leila dreams of becoming a filmmaker to voice her people's story, but her dream is hindered not only by economic limitations and state discrimination but also by patriarchal values that prioritize sons over daughters. Chia, Leila's younger brother, who becomes an activist on his campus, is killed by Iranian state repression. Chia's death becomes a turning point for Leila to transform grief into resistance by voicing her brother's ideas again. In the end, Leila's journey to Canada and her success in pursuing film studies mark a process of self-awakening as well as a symbol of hope (Homa, 2020). Through this story, Ava Homa shows that the Kurdish struggle is not only about political conflict but also about the struggle against patriarchy and the erasure of identity. Ava Homa is a woman writer from Iranian Kurdistan who now lives in Canada. She currently serves on the National Council of the Writers' Union and received awards from The Independent and the Nautilus Book Award in 2021.

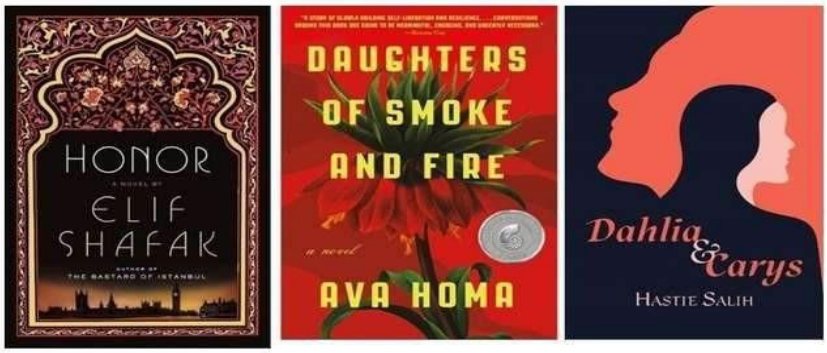

Figure 1. Covers of the three novels

The third novel is *Dahlia and Carys*, which focuses more heavily on the issue of female sexuality. The novel also addresses terrorism, hybridity, and the ambivalence of the Kurdish diaspora in Europe. It has two main characters: Dahlia, a BBC journalist of Kurdish descent, and Carys, a doctor from Wales, England. Coming from very different cultural backgrounds, the two form a "non-heterosexual relationship" regarded as taboo by society, especially Kurdish and Muslim communities (Salih, 2023). Hastie Salih, the author of this novel, is a Kurdish diaspora writer from Iraqi Kurdistan who currently works as a doctor in London. Her experience as a medical professional enables her to understand the complexity of human life, especially in matters related to sexuality. Salih's novel opens a discursive space for identities marginalized at the intersection of gender, sexuality, and culture. By choosing it as one of the material objects of this study, the researcher believes that it not only enriches the study of Kurdish women's subalternity and resistance but also contributes to "queer literature" in the Middle East.

2. Language Oppression and the Delegitimization of Kurdish Identity

In all three novels, language appears as the first arena in which Kurdish women experience oppression. The Kurdish language is not positioned as a legitimate medium of identity but as a marginal language that must be corrected, hidden, or replaced with dominant languages such as Turkish, Persian, or Arabic. Bourdieu refers to language as part of symbolic power, because language determines who is regarded as civilized, modern, and worthy of being heard (Bourdieu, 1993). In the novel Honor, we can read:

> "Whoever uttered a word in Kurdish would have to stand on one foot by the blackboard with their back turned to their classmates." (Shafak, 2012, p. 10)

The quotation above shows how students who spoke Kurdish were punished by their teachers. It reveals how the state (Turkey), through its educational system, controls language as part of a structural and disciplinary power that shapes Kurdish children's identity. Such bullying was carried out not only by teachers but also by other students who belonged to the majority ethnic group (Turkish).

> "She's always calling you 'my sultan,' the boy said, and all that 'Kurdish gibberish.' Sultan of the slum. He is!" (Shafak, 2012, p. 163)

Iskander, Pembe's son, who is ethnically Kurdish, is bullied by his Turkish classmates, who refer to the Kurdish language as gibberish (meaningless chatter). Calling a minority language "gibberish" is a practice often found in colonial or dominant-state contexts that frame minority languages as "nonsense," as if their speakers are not truly "speaking" at all. Furthermore, by mocking the child as the "sultan of the slum," we can see that Turkish children regard Kurds as a group belonging to a lower social class. Here we can see that ethnic identity, state apparatuses, and social class work intersectionally to marginalize certain identities. The banning of Kurdish is often seen as a strategy within nation-building projects to maintain the dominance of the majority language as the only legitimate language (Sheyholislami, 2022). Ideally, however, state policy should be able to embrace the various groups in society, especially minority and marginalized groups (Yahya et al., 2022). Moreover, international law (especially as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) mandates all states to grant fair rights to all their citizens, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or religion (Dewi et al., 2020).

Figure 2. Map of the Kurdish population in four countries.

Source: BBC, 2021

In the following quotes, we can see how the Kurdish language is placed in a lower position.

> "Idiot! Translate to Arabic. No one speaks Kurdish in God's place." (Homa, 2020, p. 121)

> "Persian! The guard pounded the off-white walls. The floor and ceiling shook with his rage. We stopped talking. I used the guard's language, though it tasted bitter on my lips." (Homa, 2020, p. 185)

In the first quote, Arab ethnic arrogance in Iraq is visible when a Kurd is insulted for praying to God in Kurdish. Here, Arabic is positioned not merely as a means of

communication but as the center of religious and cultural legitimacy, while Kurdish is pushed to the margins and regarded as illegitimate, unsacred, and less valuable. This way of thinking shows how the superiority of Arabic is reproduced through narrow religious interpretation, even though the Qur'an itself affirms that human dignity is not determined by race, ethnicity, or skin color but by piety (Qur'an, Al-Hujurat [49]: 13). Meanwhile, in the second quotation, repression of Kurdish identity is visible even in prison, where political prisoners are forbidden to speak their own mother tongue. When Kurdish is systematically suppressed, while Arabic and Persian are institutionalized as dominant languages in education, religion, and law, what is actually taking place is symbolic violence that pushes Kurds to question their own identity.

Meanwhile, in Turkey, a study of tolerance among high school students in the city of Izmir, Turkey, proved that Kurdish students, who form a minority, still frequently face ridicule and bullying from their peers. The insults that often appear are "backward," "terrorist," and "disloyal" (Turgut & Çelik, 2024). The ban on the use of Kurdish by Kurdish children in Turkish schools also makes them ashamed of and look down on their own language (Kawa et al., 2020). As a result, Kurds are pushed to internalize inferiority, as criticized by Fanon in his description of the colonized subject who is forced to use the colonizer's language in order to survive (Fanon, 2008).

> "We followed the Persian national anthem with chants of 'Death to America, Death to Israel.' It was the only time we girls were allowed, even encouraged, to be heard." (Homa, 2020, p. 27)

It should be emphasized that the oppression of language experienced by the Kurds is felt more heavily by women because they bear layered oppression. In the quotation above, Leila recounts that at school she was forced to sing the Iranian national anthem in Persian. Leila explains that Kurdish women have never been given the freedom to "sing" (that is, to have a voice), either by the state or by the Kurdish community itself. The only time they are allowed to speak loudly and are even encouraged to be heard is when they sing the national anthem. In her essay Can the Subaltern Speak?, Spivak does not only ask why the subaltern can speak but also why their voice is not heard (Spivak, 1994). In this case, Kurdish women as subaltern subjects can indeed speak and be heard, but unfortunately their voices are appreciated only when they support the state agenda, namely the inculcation of Iranian nationalism.

For Kurdish women, the demand is not only to abandon their ethnic language but also to live within a patriarchal structure that from the beginning has limited women's voices. Therefore, the issue of language in the three novels is not merely a linguistic issue but a form of social inequality that determines access to education, law, and other rights. Kurdish women who do not master the dominant language appear as the most vulnerable party because ethnic identity and gender meet to narrow their room for movement.

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Figure 3. Kurdish women.

Source: origins.osu.edu

> "We were robbed of our language, our heritage. Little by little, we began to understand that our mother tongue wasn't the language of power and prosperity." (Homa, 2020, p. 24)

The quote above succinctly captures what Kurdish women feel. Their language occupies a much lower social, economic, and political hierarchy, so Kurdish identity becomes something of little use if one wishes to experience power and prosperity.

3. Women's Subordination within the Family and Community

Gender is a social construct or social formation that can be shaped or changed (Luckyto et al., 2021). However, Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, explains that women are often viewed as the second sex, the Other, and turned into objects, while men are regarded as the dominant subject (Beauvoir, 1997). Women are seen merely as complements or even as shadows of men, without the right to define themselves. The next form of oppression found in the novels is the subordination of women within the family and community. In Kurdish tradition, the birth of a son is placed as a marker of a woman's success, whereas the birth of a daughter is associated with disappointment, failure, and even shame. Several quotations from the novel *Honor* illustrate this:

> "Eight births, five miscarriages, one dead baby, and not one was a son." (Shafak, 2012, p. 19)

> "Cut me, you bitch! 'Take him out,' Naze ordered and then laughed… "It's a boy, don't you see? My son is coming!" … Naze did not survive. Nor did the baby." (Shafak, 2012, p. 19)

The first quotation depicts Naze's grief at never having "succeeded" in giving birth to a son. Naze's harsh words to the midwife "Cut me, you bitch!" are not merely a spontaneous emotional outburst but a sign of desperation long accumulated in her body and psyche. Those words show how childbirth becomes an arena in which status is at stake. A

woman's body is forced to "succeed" in producing a son in order to meet family expectations. The narrative then ends tragically. Naze loses not only her life, but also her ninth child, who also turns out to be female. Abbasi's (2018) survey of parents' sex preference for children shows that the majority of parents in North Khorasan Province want their first child to be male. Some even agree that women who do not have a son deserve to be called infertile (Abassi et al., 2018).

> "Mom, this is not fair. Iskender has his own room, and he's only a year older than me. Why do you give such privileges to him just because he's a boy?" (Shafak, 2012, p. 76)

The subordination of women is passed down to the next generation. Pembe, Naze's daughter, who has now become a mother, also gives privileges to her son over her daughter. The quotation above tells the story of Esma, Pembe's daughter, who protests the unequal treatment she receives simply because she is female, while her brother Iskender has a room of his own. The issue of "a room of one's own" raised by Esma reminds us of Virginia Woolf's idea in her book *A Room of One's Own* (1929), which emphasizes the importance of private space for a woman to build autonomy; when that space is taken away, what is lost is not only comfort, but also the opportunity to become a full subject (Woolf, 2022).

> "Chia was praised at home and school for his intelligence, and I was blamed for not being as clever and as neat as he was. I was good at erecting my gallows." (Homa, 2020, p. 39)

> "As more doors opened for him, just as many slammed in my face" (Homa, 2020, p. 59)

In *Daughters of Smoke and Fire*, Leila is jealous that her younger brother's achievements are appreciated more, while her own sacrifices are never acknowledged. The phrase "erecting my gallows" implies Leila's despair as a Kurdish woman who feels unworthy of life. Leila feels that as more doors open for Chia, her younger brother, more doors close to her as a daughter. This not only shows the difference in opportunities between Kurdish men and women but also conveys Leila's feelings of isolation and frustration in the face of injustice. Subordination often appears as an unequal affective system in which praise is given to men, while women are shaped through criticism, guilt, and the obligation to sacrifice. This produces an internalization of inferiority that makes women doubt their own value.

Even so, we should not read such subordination as an inherent trait of the Kurds. A number of studies on Kurdish culture actually show traces of "matriarchy" in history. These traces can first be found at the mythological level, because the Kurdistan region was at the center of Mesopotamian civilization, which from the outset was rich in narratives about goddesses with high authority, such as Ishtar (goddess of love and virtue), Ninsun (the mother of Gilgamesh), and Shahmaran (the serpent goddess) (Ishtar, Encyclopedia Britannica, 2024). Some Kurdish rulers in the late nineteenth century were also women,

such as Adela Khanum, who was highly respected by the British colonial government (Gunter, 2004). This shows that Kurdish women in the past held a high status, no less than men. The following quotation reinforces this:

> "Despite our long tradition of having female rulers, we've become a nation of burned women." (Homa, 2020, p. 59)

This has led some scholars to argue that colonialism, modernity, prolonged war, and gender-biased religious interpretation have contributed to strengthening patriarchy in Kurdish society. Efrati states that Western colonialism reinforced patriarchy through administrative engineering and the codification of law. Bengio (2014) shows that nation-building processes and armed conflict changed gender relations by placing men as symbols of community continuity, while women were positioned as guardians of honor. In other words, women's subordination does not arise from a static tradition but from historical situations that continuously produce a sense of threat and the need to control women's bodies. This is where intersectionality becomes important. Kurdish women are subordinated not only because they are women but also because they belong to an ethnic minority. When gender and ethnic identity meet, they produce experiences of injustice different from those experienced by majority women or Kurdish men.

4. Double Burden and the Exploitation of Women's Labor

Kurdish women are known to have a stronger work ethic than women of other ethnic groups in the Middle East, although their work is often limited to low-paid jobs, such as agricultural labor or domestic service. This differs from Arab or Turkish women, who are less commonly found in those sectors. In addition to being subordinated, the Kurdish women in the three novels also bear a double burden. They work in the public sphere to support the family economy but at the same time are still required to perform domestic work and serve men at home. This is what is referred to as the double burden. Hochschild and Machung argue that working women face "*the second shift"* when they come home, because they must do unpaid housework after spending the whole day doing paid work at their jobs. This places women in a dilemma over how to balance work responsibilities and family responsibilities (Hochschild & Machung, 2003).

> "You come home at this hour and you think I'm going to believe your lies. Where's the money, you whore?" (Shafak, 2012, p. 79)

In the novel *Honor,* Pembe is forced to work as a domestic helper when her husband, who is addicted to alcohol and survives on odd jobs, can no longer be relied upon as the family's economic provider. Yet Pembe's hard work does not make her position more respected. On the contrary, she remains suspected, insulted, and required to obey. This shows that women's economic labor does not automatically erase patriarchy. Even when women become the backbone of the family, men's symbolic authority is still maintained through harsh language, control, and moral stigma, with a husband calling his

own wife a "whore." Here, class inequality worsens gender inequality: poverty makes women's labor increasingly necessary, yet at the same time increasingly exploited.

> "I am the one who has to feed four mouths, and I cannot work and do all the housework too" (Homa, 2020, p. 79).
>
> "Baba refused to do 'women's work,' although he had more spare time than the rest of us combined. "I never get a hot meal in this house," he reproached." (Homa, 2020, p. 37)

A similar situation is depicted in *Daughters of Smoke and Fire* through the character of Hana. She must feed the family and work outside the home, yet her husband still refuses to do what is called "women's work." This attitude shows that the domestic division of labor is determined not by the family's real needs, but by patriarchal norms. Women are required to bear two spheres at once, while men are able to retain their symbolic right as heads of the family even when they fail to function economically. Modern capitalism depends on reproductive labor (such as caring, nurturing, and cooking), which sustains life and restores labor power, but this work is systematically naturalized as women's destiny. Unpaid reproductive labor is often naturalized as love, devotion, and women's nature (Federici, 2025). In the Middle East, gender roles often remain highly rigid, with women frequently positioned in subordinate roles. Nevertheless, gender should not be understood as a fixed biological reality but as a social construct shaped through historical developments, cultural norms, and power relations within society (Azzahid & Rano, 2025).

> "How could a female doctor balance family life with full time work." (Salih, 2023, p. 57)
>
> "This had led to a row with Phil, who had shouted at her, saying she was heartless to leave him alone to care for his widowed mother." (Salih, 2023, p. 87)

Dahlia and Carys expand this issue by presenting Carys, an English female doctor who is friends with Dahlia, a Kurdish girl. Carys often tells Dahlia that she is frequently torn between her exhausting work as a doctor and household matters. Although she is very busy, Carys is still expected by her husband to care for her elderly mother-in-law. The presence of Carys as an English woman is very important because it seems to deconstruct the assumption that the double burden is experienced only by "traditional" Eastern women. Even in Western social spaces, which are often claimed to be more equal, women still face pressure to balance professional responsibilities and moral responsibilities as wives or mothers. Thus, gender injustice is not limited by the geography of East versus West. It is a structural problem that moves across cultures. At this point, the double burden must be read as the meeting point between patriarchy and social inequality. Class determines the kinds of work women can access; migration determines their vulnerability as workers, while family norms determine that domestic labor remains women's responsibility.

5. Violence: Between Honor and Control over Women's Bodies

The peak of Kurdish women's oppression in the three novels appears in violence. Violence does not emerge as a random act committed by deviant individuals but as the product of a social structure that normalizes control over women's bodies. In Daughters of Smoke and Fire, the female body is portrayed as something that must be covered and shunned because it is associated with sin. Such an imagination shifts the source of blame from men onto women's bodies so that women are positioned simultaneously as objects of surveillance and as moral scapegoats. Irigaray (1985) reminds us that the female body is often defined through men's needs and fears, not through women's own experiences (Irigaray, 1985).

> "This estranged body of mine, introduced to me as something to be covered and spurned because it was a source of sin, and only men's sin." (Homa, 2020, p. 79).

> "They even raped the young women they sentenced to death because they believed virgins would go to heaven and that those opposing the state should only go to hell." (Homa, 2020, p. 66)

The quotation explains the sexual violence committed by Iranian soldiers against Kurdish women political prisoners before execution. Rape was committed not only as physical violence but also to "defile" them morally and spiritually because of the belief that women who lost their virginity would not enter heaven. From a postcolonial perspective, this act shows how the state uses the bodies of dissident groups as objects of power and humiliation. The violence is intersectional because it targets Kurdish women on the basis of gender, ethnicity, and political position. Field evidence also shows similar practices, such as the testimony of a former prison executioner during the Anfal campaign (1986–1989) and reports of mass arrests and sexual violence against Kurdish women detainees during the demonstrations in Iran in 2022.

In the novel Honor, honor-based violence becomes a central theme. Women's bodies are treated as bearers of the family's good name so that any deviation from sexual or social norms can be regarded as a collective stain that must be "cleansed." This is where the practice of honor killing is frequently found. Honor killing is defined as the tradition of killing one's own family member who is considered to have violated the family's honor (Dailey & Singh, 2025). It is estimated that around 5,000 women are killed every year in the name of honor (WEF, 2020). Because the punishment for perpetrators can be severe, they often resort to forced suicide, in which victims of honor killing are compelled to end their own lives, usually by hanging themselves or drinking poison (Gregory et al., 2020). In Honor, Hediye, Pembe's sister, falls in love with a stranger and runs away to the city with him. Unfortunately, Hediye's lover betrays her and abandons her in Istanbul, canceling their marriage plans. Hediye, who has sacrificed everything for love, is forced to return to the village.

> "Now I know the reason why God gives me no sons, Berzo said. If I had a son, I'd ask him to kill you and clean our family's good name." (Shafak, 2013, p. 266).
>
> "I'd rather see the corpse of a daughter of mine in the Euphrates than have her bring me disgrace." (Shafak, 2013, p. 194).
>
> "She had hanged herself with the rope served to her in the cauldron." (Shafak, 2013, p. 267)

The first and second quotations show how disappointed Berzo, Hediye's father, is, to the point that he considers his daughter more worthy of death than of bringing disgrace. The third quotation becomes the answer: Hediye finally commits suicide. In this situation, Hediye experiences layered pressures: betrayal by the boyfriend who abandoned her, rejection from the home that should have been a place of protection, and both symbolic and real threats from a culture of honor that places death as a way of erasing "shame." Therefore, the sentence stating that the rope for suicide had been prepared (by the stepmother) indicates that Hediye's death was essentially "prepared" by her own social environment, by family, by the culture of honor, and by the patriarchal system that drives women to the point of despair until they feel they have no space left in which to live. The suicide witnessed directly by Pembe leaves a deep trauma and makes her understand the consequences that women must face when they oppose the norms of honor. Pembe never imagined that decades later a similar tragedy would befall her, even though she had long left her homeland.

> "BOY KILLED HIS MOTHER FOR 'HONOUR', 2 DECEMBER 1978. A 16-
> year-old boy of Turkish/Kurdish origin stabbed his mother to death in Hackney in an act of honour killing." (Shafak, 2012, h.266)
>
> Meaning: "BOY KILLED HIS MOTHER FOR 'HONOUR', 2 DECEMBER 1978. A 16-year-old boy of Turkish/Kurdish origin stabbed his mother to death in Hackney in an act of honour killing."

The British newspaper headline above shows that the logic of honor can travel across migratory space. Pembe is killed by Iskender, her own son, because she is discovered to have had an affair, while Adam, Pembe's husband, who had already kept a mistress and was irresponsible, faces no consequences at all. Pembe's move to Britain does not automatically free women from patriarchal control, because the code of honor is carried into diasporic space as a way of preserving communal identity amid a sense of threat. The following quotation laments Pembe's fate, showing that she continues to suffer even after migrating to Europe.

> "If she always ended up confined between walls, what was the use of her traveling to a faraway country?" (Shafak, 2012, p. 4)

Geographical relocation does not always mean a relocation from power. Pembe does move from her remote village in Turkish Kurdistan to Britain, but she remains trapped within walls of honor, gender roles, and family logic. Therefore, migration in the novel does not appear as a solution for escaping patriarchy but as a new space where coloniality, patriarchy, and migrant capitalism intersect. Diaspora often builds a very strong collective memory of the homeland. In certain situations, that memory turns into conservatism that tightens control over women (Safran, 2021). Therefore, migration is not only a story of mobility but also a new arena in which tradition, racism, and identity anxiety reinforce one another.

Nevertheless, reading honor killing as a "typical Kurdish tradition" often causes the analysis to stop at culture alone, as if the practice were an inherent characteristic of Kurdish patriarchy. In fact, postcolonial studies reject this essentialist view, because framing honor killing as a cruel cultural product tends to be shallow and Orientalist. Instead, honor killing is better understood as a mechanism of social control that hardens when a community faces the tensions of modernity. Mojab calls it the "dark side of modernity": modernity does not always liberate but can also trigger insecurity and harsher control (Mojab, 2012).

Another interesting point is that honor killing survives not only because of Eastern culture but also because Western legal frameworks have at times provided justification. For example, the defense of "provocation" often has roots in colonial penal codes (such as those of Britain, France, and Spain) commonly referred to as "crimes of passion," which shift the focus from violence against the victim to the "emotion of the perpetrator." Historical records from Iraq (which includes the Kurdistan region) under British rule show how the British colonial administration introduced customary/tribal law through particular judicial mechanisms and negotiations with male elites (tribal chiefs to religious leaders). In Efrati's analysis, this resulted in the "tribalizing" of women: women's affairs were placed within the framework of tribal kinship and community morality, rather than as rights of modern citizens (Efrati, 2012). Here we know that the discourse of "honor" does not exist outside modernity; rather, it has been shaped, institutionalized, and "secured" by colonial legal formations and the modernization of criminal law. Even worse, the stereotype of honor killing as a Kurdish problem continues to be reproduced within media framings (Rasyid et al., 2026). Another unique finding from *Dahlia and Carys* is that violence on women is not only faced by heterosexual women but also the non-heterosexuals.

> "Her voice was hushed but steady. 'I'm… I wanted to tell you that I'm attracted to women." (Salih, 2023, p. 94).
>
> "What a joke. What utter disrespect after all I've done to propel you forward through life, sparing every penny to support your education." (Salih, 2023, p. 94)

The scene is significant because Dahlia's declaration as a lesbian is presented not as an act of rebellion, but as an act of honesty. However, instead of receiving understanding, she is met with hostility and emotional violence. This suggests that the novel broadens the discussion of violence against women by showing that oppression also operates through the policing of sexuality, especially when women fail to conform to heteronormative expectations. The mother's response, "What a joke. What utter disrespect" reveals how family becomes a mechanism of control. The mother frames her daughter's confession as betrayal, ingratitude, and moral failure. In this way, the violence Dahlia faces is not physical but psychological and symbolic, expressed through rejection and condemnation. The mother's words also show how parental sacrifice is invoked as a moral weapon to discipline daughters into compliance. Thus, the novel demonstrates that violence against women can emerge within the intimate space of the family, where cultural, moral, and emotional authority intersect.

Dahlia's experience also highlights the complexity of diaspora for non-heterosexual women from the Middle East. Europe may appear to promise freedom, safety, and self-expression, yet migration does not automatically erase the oppressive values carried through family and community structures. Even in diaspora, Dahlia remains trapped within the expectations of her cultural background, particularly the demand to embody a respectable, heterosexual femininity. Her coming out, therefore, does not simply mark a moment of self-revelation but also exposes the persistence of patriarchal and heteronormative violence beyond national borders.

From all analysis above, we can conclude that violence operates at layered points of identity where gender intertwines with ethnicity (Kurdish minority status), class, age, and migrant status. Overall, violence against Kurdish women arises from the intersection of various domains of power. The state controls through law, prisons, and language policy; the community controls through honor and morality; the family controls through role division and threats, while the broader society controls through racism and stigma. Therefore, the oppression Kurdish women experience cannot be reduced to a single term and is continuously reproduced.

6. Racism

Social inequality in these novels is also clearly visible in diasporic space. Migration is often imagined as a way out of repression in the homeland, but for Kurdish women, geographical relocation does not automatically mean freedom from oppression. In Britain and Canada, they do escape some of the repression of the states they left behind, but they soon encounter other forms of injustice: racism, immigrant stereotypes, Islamophobia, and pressures to assimilate. This experience shows that diaspora is an ambivalent space that offers new possibilities but also produces new vulnerabilities.

> "Dahlia stepped away from the Brexiteer, acutely aware of her dark hair and olive skin. She felt like she was on the run again, like she needed to hide."

(Salih, 2023, p. 2)

> "Damn it! She felt like an uprooted mulberry tree in the middle of the rumbling London traffic." (Salih, 2023, p. 1)

> "If the names of my classmates had been Aisha, Farah, or Zeineb, instead of Tracey, Debbie, or Clare, would I have fitted in more easily?" (Shafak, 2012, p. 81)

The quotes above show that the alienation experienced by Dahlia and Esma does not arise merely from cultural difference but from the way Western social space reads their bodies and identities through a colonial-modern lens. When Dahlia steps away from a Brexit demonstrator because she becomes aware of her dark hair and olive skin, her body immediately becomes a suspicious sign. In that moment, London does not appear as a neutral space but as a postcolonial space that still sustains the politics of distinction between center and margin. The renewed desire to hide shows that diaspora does not automatically erase old trauma; on the contrary, the experience of the West reactivates memories of insecurity in the homeland.

The metaphor of "an uprooted mulberry tree" also affirms that Dahlia's uprootedness is not only emotional but political: she is uprooted from Kurdish language, history, and cultural continuity and is then forced to negotiate with a modern urban space that demands adaptation without truly offering acceptance. A similar thing happens to Esma, who finds it difficult to fit in with her classmates because cultural difference is visible through names. The same is true of what happens to Pembe in interacting with British citizens and to Leila after migrating to Canada.

> "Whoa, you're a walking catastrophe." "I don't think she even speaks English," added the assistant. (Shafak, 2012, p. 112)

> "I traveled to the ocean to suffer the same discriminatory mentality I thought I had escaped." (Homa, 2020, p. 267)

The first quote tells of Pembe experiencing racism while buying cake. From an intersectional point of view, the interpersonal domain is often shaped by broader structural domains. Pembe is treated harshly not only because she misunderstands the shop assistant's English but because her presence as a migrant woman from the East is read as a disturbance to the order of public space governed by white norms. In the second quotation, Leila hopes that by leaving Iran and moving to Canada she will avoid the discrimination she has long experienced as a Kurd. In reality, however, she must also face racism in Canada. This shows that discrimination against ethnic and cultural identity is not limited to one place, but can develop and manifest in different forms in a new setting.

In short, the characters in the three novels feel alienated in public space because they are always aware that they are never fully read as "normal" citizens. In such conditions, Kurdish women face two forms of surveillance at once. From within the

community, they are supervised so that they continue to maintain family values and collective identity; from outside the community, they are judged through stereotypes about the Middle East, Islam, and immigrants. Goffman (1963) calls this process stigma, namely when a certain identity becomes a marker of social deficiency that changes the way a person is treated (Goffman, 1963).

In the case of Pembe's murder by her own son (after she was suspected of having an affair and thus bringing shame on the family), Iskender complains about how the British media reported the murder he committed:

> "This is a typical case of Middle Eastern patriarchal tradition," blah, blah, blah. I was so irritated I never spoke to a journalist again. They're not really interested in the truth. All they want to do is to fit you into the story that's already in their minds." (Shafak, 2012, p. 136)

> "This man is a prototype of the kind of immigrant who is clearly incompatible with the basic tenets of European civilization." (Shafak, 2012, p. 136)

Here it is evident that the British media ignored the chronology of events, the perpetrator's young age, pressure from the extended family, and the psychological complexity behind the act. The tragedy is reduced to evidence of "Middle Eastern patriarchal tradition," as if the violence arose from a static and inherent Eastern culture. Such a reading is deeply Orientalist because it erases nuance and turns the individual into an illustration of a stereotype prepared in advance. It is no longer Iskender or his family who speaks, but the dominant Western discourse that arranges them within a grand narrative of the barbaric East and the civilized Europe. In Spivak's terms, the subaltern voice is not truly heard; it is captured, translated unilaterally, and then used to confirm the authority of the dominant interpreter. The statement that Iskender is a type of immigrant "incompatible with the values of European civilization" shows the operation of the civilizing mission in modern form. This discourse no longer appears as a formal colonial project but as cultural neocolonialism. The West presents itself as the center of norms, while the East is positioned as a problem that must be managed and monitored.

D. Conclusion

Based on a reading of *Honour, Daughters of Smoke and Fire,* and *Dahlia and Carys*, it can be concluded that Kurdish women are represented as subjects who experience layered oppression. This oppression appears in the restriction of language and the delegitimization of ethnic identity, subordination within the family, the double burden of domestic and public labor, violence, and gender-biased morality, as well as racism. Thus, patriarchy in the three novels does not stand alone but is intertwined with social inequality involving ethnicity, class, migration, and women's position in postcolonial geopolitics.

This article emphasizes that reading the suffering of Kurdish women only as an effect of local patriarchy will produce narrow and essentialist conclusions. Instead,

literature shows that their experiences are shaped by power relations moving from the household to the state, from language to law, and from the homeland to diaspora. Therefore, Kurdish women need to be understood not merely as victims but as subjects capable of revealing the impact of the intertwining of patriarchy and social inequality, reinforced by the legacy of Western colonialism in the Middle East.

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