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Silenced Voices: Representation of Palestinian Women as Subalterns in Fadwa Tuqan's *Ilaihim Warā' al-Quḍbān*

¹Namira Az Zahra Siregar
(Corresponding Author)

220301110030@student.uin-malang.ac.id

Arabic Language and Literature Department, Faculty of
Humanities, UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang,
Indonesia

²Misbahus Surur

misbahussurur@uin-malang.ac.id

Arabic Language and Literature Department, Faculty of
Humanities, UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang,
Indonesia

³Alya Arinil Haq

arnlhaq05@gmail.com

Department of Islamic Law, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt

ABSTRACT

Background: The Palestinian–Israeli conflict extends beyond territorial and political struggles, producing enduring social, cultural, and psychological suffering, particularly for Palestinian women whose experiences are frequently marginalized within colonial and patriarchal discourses.

Aims: This study examines the representation of Palestinian women as a subaltern group in Fadwa Tuqan's poem *إليهم وراء القضبان* through the perspective of Gayatri C. Spivak's theory of subalternity.

Methods: This research employs a qualitative literary textual analysis. Data were collected through close reading and note-taking techniques applied to the poem and relevant scholarly literature. The primary data consist of the selected poem, while secondary data include books and journal articles on postcolonial feminism. The analysis focuses on epistemic violence, the politics of representation, and the problem of subaltern speech to investigate how women's voices are marginalized and how the poem creates alternative spaces for resistance.

Results: Based on twenty-nine textual units identified from close reading, including significant verses, symbolic diction, and recurring thematic patterns, the findings reveal that Palestinian women are portrayed as subaltern subjects who experience structural oppression under colonial domination and patriarchal power. Simultaneously, they emerge as active agents of resistance who preserve national identity, collective memory, and cultural continuity despite systematic silencing.

Implications: This study demonstrates that literary works function not only as artistic expressions but also as sites of resistance that challenge dominant narratives and amplify marginalized voices. Furthermore, the findings contribute to postcolonial feminist scholarship by highlighting literature's critical role in representing subaltern women's experiences within contexts of colonialism, displacement, resistance, and historical injustice across diverse contexts.

Keywords: *Fadwa Tuqan; Palestinian poetry; postcolonial feminism; Palestinian women; subaltern*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The resistance of the Palestinian people against Israeli occupation is not only manifested in armed struggle but is also preserved in literary works. As one of the groups that suffer the most alongside children, Palestinian women endure pressure, threats of arrest, and even torture. Although their voices are often overlooked, they remain immortalized through poetic expressions ([Ben-Dror, 2023](#)). Many Palestinian women assume strategic roles as narrators of alternative narratives, such as Fadwa Tuqan. From a historical perspective, the resistance of the Palestinian people through literature particularly poetry cannot be separated from the long tradition of Arabic *muqawwamah* (resistance literature), which has long served as a space for collective expression ([Abbas & Noreen, 2024](#); [Gill, 2022](#)). Resistance through literature, especially poetry, can be understood as a subtle yet powerful political strategy, as it has the ability to reach and shape the consciousness of readers across generations. In the Palestinian context, poetry has long functioned as a cultural weapon, complementing forms of direct resistance ([Abu Odeh, 2021](#); [Shehadeh, 2025](#)).

Several Palestinian women poets, such as Suheir Hammad, Dareen Tatour, and Fadwa Tuqan, uphold poetry as a medium of struggle. Through carefully crafted words, they immortalize pain, longing, and the spirit of resistance. Each stanza they compose not only records personal experiences but also reflects the collective suffering of the Palestinian people, who continue to live under occupation and violence imposed by Israel ([Sliman-Baraky, 2023](#)). Amid the pressures of colonization and patriarchy, poetry becomes a form of cultural resistance capable of penetrating prison bars and separation walls. Through language that is both aesthetic and assertive, these women poets help preserve national identity, nurture historical memory, and convey the message that resistance can continue to live on through words ([Alasah, 2024](#)).

In addition, it is important to emphasize that the experiences of Palestinian women are not homogeneous. There is a diversity of experiences shaped by factors such as social class, geographical location (for example Gaza, the West Bank, or women in the diaspora), as well as their level of involvement in the struggle ([Ningrum et al., 2024](#); [Selviana, 2023](#)). Postcolonial feminist theory argues that women's experiences under colonialism cannot be generalized through a single category rooted in Western feminism. Mohanty (2003) criticizes perspectives that tend to portray Third World women merely as victims, whereas in reality they are also active agents who shape strategies of resistance. From this perspective, the poems of Fadwa Tuqan can be understood as a medium through which Palestinian women negotiate their complex identities, expressing suffering while simultaneously igniting resistance. Palestinian women serve as pillars of cultural resilience, nurturing their families and preserving national identity ([Harum et al., 2024](#)). Their contributions to the struggle against Israeli aggression reveal the complex ways in which women's identities are formed within conditions of war and oppression ([Korteweg & Yurdakul, 2021](#)).

This research is important because the voices of Palestinian women have often been reduced by two dominant forces: colonialism, which oppresses them structurally, and patriarchy, which restricts their agency within their own society. Spivak (1988) refers to this phenomenon as "*epistemic violence*," a form of knowledge-based violence that erases subaltern voices from the stage of history. In the Palestinian context, many narratives of struggle have been written by men or by Western scholars, while women's experiences are frequently positioned at the margins. The poetry of Fadwa Tuqan challenges this narrative dominance by presenting women's experiences as an inseparable part of the Palestinian national struggle.

Spivak (1988), through the theory of subalternity, argues that in colonial contexts marginalized groups including women often lose the opportunity to voice their own experiences directly. Instead, their stories are frequently represented through the

narratives of others (Surur, 2023). Meanwhile, Mohanty (2003) emphasizes the importance of viewing Third World women as active agents who are capable of producing their own meanings and strategies of resistance. The ideas of these two scholars are relevant for interpreting the poetry of Fadwa Tuqan as a representation of the voices of Palestinian women who, despite being oppressed, continue to resist (Surur, 2023). One of the most interesting aspects of the poem "إليهم وراء القضبان" is how its verses employ metaphorical language to portray the condition of imprisoned Palestinian women. The imagery of iron bars not only represents a physical prison but also symbolizes the social and political structures that confine women's movement. Another distinctive feature of this poem lies in its blending of personal narrative with the historical and collective experiences of the Palestinian people. The poem can also be understood as part of a cultural resistance against the Israeli colonial project that seeks to erase Palestinian identity. It is important to note that since the Nakba in 1948, the Palestinian people have experienced mass displacement, land confiscation, and the destruction of their cultural spaces (Abdullah & Hassan, 2025). In such circumstances, poetry functions as a medium for preserving identity and resisting the erasure of history. Fadwa Tuqan uses poetry not merely to express suffering but also to ensure that the collective memory of her people is not lost.

Several studies have examined the works of Fadwa Tuqan, although most have not specifically focused on the poem "إليهم وراء القضبان" from a postcolonial feminist perspective. For example, research by Muhammad and Zaidan (2024) discusses Fadwa Tuqan's life journey, marked by oppression within a patriarchal family, as well as the transformation of her poetry from romantic themes. Another study by Liza (2025) analyzes two of Fadwa Tuqan's poems by combining the theory of justice proposed by John Rawls, the concept of nationalism by Benedict Anderson, and the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud. Furthermore, research by Deair (2022) explores Palestinian resistance poetry after the Six-Day War, particularly the works of Fadwa Tuqan, as a reflection of Palestinian national culture and resistance to Zionism in the historical context of occupation. Meanwhile, Istanbuli (2023) compares the poetry of Fadwa Tuqan with that of Tahereh Saffarzadeh to reveal how gender elements are reflected in their poetic language.

Within the framework of postcolonial feminist studies, this research positions Palestinian women not merely as objects of suffering but also as agents of history. They produce meaning, articulate their experiences, and develop distinctive strategies of resistance through literary works. This perspective is particularly important considering that Western feminist literature has often failed to fully capture the complexity of women's experiences in the Third World, including those in Palestine. By examining the poetry of Fadwa Tuqan, this study aims to contribute to challenging such stereotypes and to demonstrate that Palestinian women possess authentic voices that deserve to be heard.

This study shares with previous research a common concern with identity, power relations, and women's struggles in Palestinian literature. However, it differs in its object of analysis, analytical focus, and theoretical framework. Previous studies by Deair (2022), Istanbuli (2023), Liza (2025), and Muhammad and Zaidan (2024) primarily examine Palestinian women through liberal or radical feminist perspectives or discuss resistance and identity without specifically addressing how colonial and patriarchal power simultaneously construct women as subaltern subjects. Consequently, these studies provide limited explanation of the intersection between colonial domination, gender oppression, and the silencing of women's voices. To address this gap, the present study applies Gayatri C. Spivak's theory of subalternity, particularly the concepts of epistemic violence, the politics of representation, and subaltern speech, to examine how Palestinian women are represented in Fadwa Tuqan's poem "إليهم وراء القضبان". By focusing on these analytical dimensions, this study demonstrates not only those Palestinian women

experience multiple forms of marginalization but also how the poem constructs literary space for recovering subaltern voices and representing women as agents of resistance under colonial rule. Therefore, this study contributes a more specific postcolonial feminist reading of Fadwa Tuqan's poetry by explaining the relationship between subalternity, resistance, and the construction of women's voices within the context of colonialism.

1.1 Research Gap and Novelty

Several previous studies have examined Fadwa Tuqan's literary works from different perspectives. For example, Muhammad and Zaidan (2024) explored Tuqan's personal life and the transformation of her poetry from romantic expression to resistance literature. Likewise, Deair (2022) analyzed Tuqan's anti-war poetry as a reflection of Palestinian nationalism and resistance against Zionism within its historical context. Comparative research by Istanbuli (2023) investigated gendered language in the poetry of Fadwa Tuqan and Tahereh Saffarzadeh, while Liza (2025) examined Tuqan's poetry through the philosophical perspectives of justice, nationalism, and psychoanalysis.

However, these studies primarily emphasize nationalism, anti-war discourse, gender representation, or philosophical values without specifically examining how Palestinian women are constructed as subaltern subjects through the intersecting systems of colonial domination and patriarchy. Existing studies also provide limited discussion of epistemic violence, the politics of representation, and the question of whether subaltern women are able to speak, which constitute the core concepts of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial feminist theory.

Methodologically, previous research has predominantly analyzed Tuqan's poetry from historical, comparative, linguistic, or philosophical perspectives. Few studies have conducted an in-depth qualitative textual analysis of a single poem by integrating Spivak's concepts of subalternity, epistemic violence, representation, and subaltern speech within the broader framework of postcolonial feminism. Consequently, the relationship between poetic language, symbolic resistance, and the recovery of marginalized women's voices remains insufficiently explored.

Therefore, this study seeks to fill these gaps by examining the representation of Palestinian women in Fadwa Tuqan's poem *إليهم وراء القضبان* through Gayatri C. Spivak's theory of subalternity. Specifically, the study investigates how colonialism and patriarchy simultaneously construct women as subaltern subjects, how the poem represents epistemic violence and the silencing of women's voices, and how poetic discourse creates alternative spaces for resistance and agency.

The novelty of this research lies in three significant contributions. First, unlike previous studies that focus primarily on nationalism or gender representation, this study centers on the concept of subalternity to explain the intersection of colonialism and patriarchy in shaping Palestinian women's experiences. Second, it offers a micro-textual analysis of a single poem, allowing a more detailed interpretation of metaphor, imagery, symbolism, and poetic structure as mechanisms of resistance. Third, by integrating Spivak's concepts of epistemic violence, politics of representation, and subaltern speech, this research demonstrates how literature functions not merely as a reflection of oppression but also as a space where marginalized women reclaim their voices, preserve collective memory, and construct cultural resistance within the Palestinian colonial context.

1.2 Research Questions

This study aims to examine the representation of Palestinian women as subaltern subjects in Fadwa Tuqan's poem *إليهم وراء القضبان* through the lens of Gayatri C. Spivak's theory of subalternity. It further seeks to analyze how the poem simultaneously reveals the

intersection of colonial domination and patriarchal power in constructing epistemic violence and silencing Palestinian women's voices. Additionally, this research explores the ways in which the poem constructs literary space for resistance, agency, and the recovery of subaltern voices within the broader context of Palestinian colonial experience. To achieve these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How are Palestinian women represented as subaltern subjects in Fadwa Tuqan's poem *إليهم وراء القضبان* through the perspective of Gayatri C. Spivak's theory of subalternity?
2. How does the poem portray the intersection of colonial domination and patriarchal power in constructing epistemic violence and the silencing of Palestinian women's voices?
3. In what ways does the poem construct literary space for resistance, agency, and the recovery of subaltern voices within the context of Palestinian colonial experience?

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative literary textual analysis to examine the representation of Palestinian women as subaltern subjects in Fadwa Tuqan's poem *إليهم وراء القضبان*. Rather than using critical discourse analysis or content analysis, this study focused on close reading as the primary analytical method because the object of the study is a literary text whose meanings are constructed through poetic language, symbolism, imagery, and aesthetic expression. Close textual analysis enables an in-depth interpretation of how the poem articulates colonial domination, patriarchal oppression, epistemic violence, and women's resistance within its literary, historical, and socio-political contexts (Creswell, 2007; Rarasati & Zawawi, 2024). Guided by the framework of postcolonial feminism, the analysis explored how literary devices and narrative voice represent Palestinian women as subaltern subjects and reveal forms of resistance against intersecting systems of colonial and patriarchal power.

2.2 Research Objects

The primary object of this research is Fadwa Tuqan's poem *إليهم وراء القضبان*. The poem serves as the primary source of textual data and is analyzed through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of subalternity, particularly the concepts of epistemic violence, politics of representation, and subaltern speech (Spivak, 1988, 1990), complemented by Chandra Talpade Mohanty's postcolonial feminist perspective (Mohanty, 2003). Secondary data consist of scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles discussing postcolonial feminism, Palestinian literature, subaltern studies, and Fadwa Tuqan's poetry. These sources were used to strengthen theoretical interpretation and contextual understanding.

2.3 Research Procedures

Data collection was conducted through repeated close reading and systematic note-taking of the poem. During the reading process, textual units containing representations of colonialism, patriarchy, epistemic violence, resistance, and subaltern identity were identified and documented. The analysis focused on three textual dimensions:

1. Semiotic elements, including metaphor, symbolism, imagery, and diction;
2. Narrative elements, including voice and perspective;

3. Structural elements, including stanza organization, repetition, and contrast. To ensure analytical consistency, only textual units directly related to the representation of Palestinian women as subaltern subjects were selected. A total of 29 textual units were identified and coded. However, only seven representative units are discussed extensively because they best illustrate the dominant analytical patterns, whereas the remaining units are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Primary Data	Textual units from Fadwa Tuqan's poem إليهم وراء القضبان	Texts outside the selected poem
Analytical Focus	Textual units representing subaltern identity, colonial domination, patriarchal oppression, epistemic violence, and resistance	Textual units unrelated to the research objectives
Literary Features	Metaphor, symbolism, imagery, diction, narrative voice, repetition, and stanza structure	Purely descriptive expressions without analytical relevance
Secondary Sources	Peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and studies on postcolonial feminism, Palestinian literature, and subaltern theory	Non-academic sources lacking scholarly credibility

2.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Thematic Qualitative Content Analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The analytical procedure consisted of four stages:

1. Close reading of the poem to identify meaningful textual units;
2. Theory-driven coding based on Spivak's concepts of subalternity, epistemic violence, politics of representation, and subaltern speech;
3. Thematic categorization of coded data into broader themes related to colonial domination, patriarchal structures, marginalization, and resistance;
4. Hermeneutic interpretation of the identified themes using postcolonial feminist theory.

To enhance analytical credibility, the coding results were reviewed through peer debriefing with another researcher. The English translations presented in this study were produced by the authors using a semantic translation approach. The translations were subsequently compared with the original Arabic text to ensure contextual accuracy and preserve its literary nuances.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

The analysis of Fadwa Tuqan's poem إلیهم وراء القضبان through the lens of Gayatri C. Spivak's theory of subalternity reveals three interconnected dimensions of Palestinian women's representation. First, the poem portrays Palestinian women as subaltern subjects whose voices are systematically marginalized by both colonial domination and patriarchal

structures. Second, it exposes how these intersecting forms of oppression construct epistemic violence, effectively silencing women's experiences and narratives within the broader Palestinian colonial context. Third, the poem simultaneously carves out a literary space for resistance and agency, allowing the recovery of subaltern voices through poetic expression. The following findings are organized to address each of these dimensions in accordance with the research questions formulated in this study.

The results of this study indicate that in the poem *إليهم وراء القضبان*, Palestinian women are represented as a subaltern group experiencing double marginalization as a result of colonial occupation and patriarchal systems. The concept of the subaltern and Gayatri Spivak's postcolonial feminist perspective are employed to analyze how Palestinian women become symbols of nationalism without being granted space to speak autonomously. The poem emphasizes that Palestinian women are not merely victims, but also guardians of historical narratives and national identity, even though their voices are frequently marginalized within broader power structures. Thus, the poem does not simply portray static suffering; rather, it positions women as agents who move between pain and resistance, presenting the complexity of a dual identity as both victims and narrators of alternative histories.

From the primary data source, namely Fadwa Tuqan's poem *إليهم وراء القضبان*, 29 textual units consisting of lines, phrases, and figurative expressions were identified as relevant to the representation of subaltern identity, oppression, and resistance. These units were selected through theory-driven thematic coding and interpreted using secondary sources from scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles on postcolonial feminism, subaltern studies, and Palestinian resistance literature. To provide an in-depth qualitative interpretation while avoiding repetitive analysis, the Discussion section focuses on seven representative textual units that most clearly illustrate the principal analytical patterns identified across the complete dataset. The remaining units exhibit comparable thematic characteristics and are therefore summarized in Table 2. The findings indicate that Palestinian women are represented as subaltern subjects whose experiences of colonial domination, gendered oppression, and resistance are articulated through specific poetic devices, including symbolic imagery, metaphor, and lexical choices. Rather than presenting them merely as passive victims, the poem portrays them as active participants whose attachment to the homeland and collective memory is expressed through these textual features. The detailed data are presented in the following table:

Table 2 Analysis of Subaltern Representation in the Poem

No.	Text of the Poem	Meaning of Women's Subalternity	Colonial & Patriarchal Power Relation
1.	وشرعت جهنم أبوابها (And hell flung open its gates)	Women are isolated and left without protection	Colonialism and patriarchy trap women in double suffering.
2.	وابتلعت براعم الصبي الطري (And swallowed the tender buds of childhood)	Women's youth is taken away; they are denied a natural process of growth.	Occupation destroys the future of young women.
3.	على شفاه الفتية الفرسان (Upon the lips of the young brave ones)	Women participate in voicing resistance.	Nationalism borrows women's voices but does not grant them space.

No.	Text of the Poem	Meaning of Women's Subalternity	Colonial & Patriarchal Power Relation
4.	حمرء مزهوّه (Piercing through the darkness and the walls)	Women sacrifice their bodies and blood.	Women's bodies are turned into symbols of struggle but are not valued as individuals.
5.	تخترق الظلام والجدران (Piercing through the darkness and the walls)	Women resist fear and silencing.	Women attempt to free themselves from enforced silence.
6.	بدمي أخطُ وصيتي (With my blood, I write my testament.)	Women's bodies become media of struggle.	Women's bodies are exploited by both colonial power and resistance narratives.
7.	أن تحفظوا لي ثوري (That you may preserve my revolution)	Women entrust the spirit of resistance.	Colonialism seeks to sever collective memory through women.
8.	فتح أنا.. أنا جبهة.. أنا عاصفة (I am Fatah... I am the Front... I am the Storm)	Women proclaim themselves as fighters, not merely victims.	Women's identities are asserted despite persistent marginalization.
9.	في نصف هذا الليل.. آه (In the middle of this night... Ah!)	Fear experienced in solitude.	Occupation generates psychological violence.
10.	حذاره يدقُ في الدهليز (Beware! Footsteps echo through the corridor)	Women never feel safe.	Patriarchy and colonialism create perpetual fear.
11.	مبتدع التعذيب آتٍ (From the interrogation chamber)	Torturers haunt women's consciousness	Colonial power manifests as an unceasing threat.
12.	من غرفة التحقيق (From the interrogation chamber)	Interrogation as an instrument of domination	Women are forced to submit to power structures
13.	من زمن الكابوس والجحيم والصراع (From an age of nightmares, hell, and conflict)	Past trauma persists; suffering never ends.	Occupation leaves intergenerational wounds.
14.	دمي يدقُ وعروقي والنخاع (My blood pulses through my veins and marrow)	Suffering penetrates the body, becoming collective trauma.	Women's bodies become sites of symbolic violence.
15.	فلن ينزّ من دمي جواب (No answer shall bleed from my blood)	Silence as a strategy of resistance.	Silence emerges because women's voices are disregarded
16.	الليل ناصبٌ هنا شراعه الكبير (Night has raised its vast sail here)	Women lose direction and sense of time.	Colonialism erases freedom and temporal boundaries

No.	Text of the Poem	Meaning of Women's Subalternity	Colonial & Patriarchal Power Relation
17.	ليلٌ بلا شقوق (A night without a single crack)	Total emptiness without hope or future.	Women are forced to live in imposed void.
18.	يضيع فيه الصوت والصدى يموت (Where voices are lost and every echo dies)	Women's voices are drowned in silence.	Dual power structures erase women's existence.
19.	يحوم هنا طيف أمي (My mother's spirit hovers here)	The mother appears in memory as a protector.	The mother provides strength in silence
20.	يسلب منا الشمس يسلب القمر (It steals the sun from us; it steals the moon)	All joy is taken away, leaving women in emptiness.	Colonizers seize both inner and physical spaces.
21.	خلف حدود الليل الشمس في انتظارنا (Beyond the borders of the night, the sun awaits us)	Women continue to preserve hope as symbols of resilience.	Women maintain optimism amid oppression.
22.	تشع جبهة أمي كضوء النجوم (My mother's forehead shines like the light of the stars)	The mother becomes a source of encouragement.	Women provide strength through silen
23.	قبيل اعتقالي رسمت حروفاً (Raised high like the sun)	Childhood memories become sources of strength.	Women's identities are shaped through familial love.
24.	رافعه مثل الشمس (I long for my mother's embrace and the face of daylight)	Longing for home and freedom.	Occupation strips women of fundamental rights
25.	أتوق إلى حضن أمي ووجه النهار (I long for my mother's embrace and the face of daylight)	Longing for home and freedom.	Intergenerational trauma experienced by Palestinian women.
26.	أراها على وجهها الآن صمتٌ ووحده (I long for my mother's embrace and the face of daylight)	Longing for home and freedom.	Intergenerational trauma experienced by Palestinian women.
27.	لعل دقه يسيل (Standing still, where days and seasons blend together)	People's blood continues to flow as a symbol of collective suffering.	Women's bodies become victims within continuous cycles of violence sustained by colonial and patriarchal structures.
28.	واقفتُ تختلط الأيام والفصول (Standing still, where days and seasons blend together)	Time becomes blurred; women lose life orientation.	Colonialism disrupts daily life structures, erasing identity and time.

No.	Text of the Poem	Meaning of Women's Subalternity	Colonial & Patriarchal Power Relation
29.	معطف مدرستي عالقٌ فوق مشجب (My school coat hangs upon a coat rack)	Objects from the past remain suspended, symbolizing longing and rupture.	Women's lives are forcibly halted by colonialism, including access to education and childhood.

Based on Table 2, in the poem *إليهم وراء القضبان*, the representation of Palestinian women does not merely depict suffering caused by occupation, but also demonstrates how they function as active agents in shaping narratives of resistance. Women in the poem are portrayed as resilient figures. Although they are described as being confined behind prison bars, they continue to preserve the spirit of struggle, maintain collective memory, and uphold national identity. This narrative reveals that Palestinian women experience double oppression, both from the Israeli colonial system and from patriarchal structures that restrict their social and political mobility. Therefore, this analysis aims to examine how women's voices as a subaltern group are articulated through poetry, and how Fadwa Tuqan's work, within the framework of postcolonial feminism, serves as a medium of cultural resistance.

3.2 Discussion

Women's Oppression as Colonial Violence

The first data point, represented by the line *وشرعت جهنم أبوابها* (And hell opened its gates), illustrates the extreme condition of Palestinian women's oppression, as if they are cast into an endless space of suffering. The diction of "hell" in this verse functions not only as a metaphor for brutal colonial violence, but also reflects women's inner condition, marked by the loss of safety, rights, and dignity. From October 2023 to mid-2024, Israeli aggression in Gaza resulted in the deaths of more than 12,298 women, while in the West Bank and Jerusalem, 928 female casualties were recorded. Thousands of women became widows, lost their children, or suffered amputations due to aerial and ground attacks. They live in absolute alienation, trapped between external structural violence produced by occupation and internal violence in the form of patriarchy that limits freedom of expression. This condition aligns with Spivak's (1988) argument that Palestinian women in this poem represent subaltern subjects who not only lack representational space, but also experience epistemic violence, namely the erasure of their experiences and narratives by dominant knowledge systems. This dual power structure renders them not only victims, but also invisible, unheard, and unrecognized (Mendez & Oberprantacher, 2025).

This analysis suggests that the metaphor of "hell" should not be understood as a documentary record of contemporary events, but rather as a symbolic representation of the historical realities of colonial violence experienced by Palestinians during the socio-political context in which Fadwa Tuqan composed the poem. Written in the context of the prolonged Israeli occupation following 1967 and the emergence of Palestinian resistance literature, the poem reflects recurring experiences of dispossession, fear, and collective suffering rather than a specific historical episode. In this study, contemporary reports on the condition of Palestinian women are employed only as illustrative points of resonance, demonstrating the continuing relevance of Tuqan's poetic imagery rather than serving as evidence of what the poem itself documents or preserves (Hosny, 2025). This interpretation is consistent with recent scholarship, which argues that Palestinian resistance literature transforms individual trauma into a collective cultural memory that

continues to resonate across historical periods, while simultaneously challenging colonial narratives through literary representation ([Kayali, 2025](#)).

By employing the metaphor of "hell," Tuqan transforms individual suffering into a universal poetic symbol that communicates the psychological and emotional consequences of colonial domination beyond its immediate historical context. Recent studies on Palestinian women's literary resistance similarly argue that women writers employ symbolic language to negotiate oppression, preserve cultural memory, and construct forms of resistance that transcend military and political struggle ([Daghmin, 2026](#)).

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, this metaphor constitutes a form of *reclaiming voice*, through which women challenge their exclusion from dominant narratives and assert their agency within colonial and patriarchal structures. Rather than documenting a particular contemporary event, Tuqan's poem invites readers from different historical contexts to recognize the persistence of colonial violence and the enduring struggle for dignity, identity, and self-representation. In this sense, the poem functions as a literary space in which subaltern experiences are articulated symbolically, allowing subsequent generations to reinterpret its meanings in light of continuing historical realities rather than as a literal account of present-day events ([Abdullah & Hasan, 2025](#)).

The Erasure of Women's Future and Childhood

The second data point, represented by the line *وابتلعت براعم الصَّبِي* (And it swallowed the tender buds of childhood), reveals that occupation not only destroys women's present lives, but also erases their future potential from an early age. Youth, which should be filled with growth, education, and the fulfillment of personal potential, instead becomes a dark period marked by loss and trauma. Reports from The Palestine Chronicle ([2024](#)) indicate that approximately 17,000 mothers lost their children, 50,000 pregnant women suffered miscarriages, and thousands were forced to give birth without adequate medical facilities. Schools were destroyed or converted into refugee shelters. Within Spivak's postcolonial feminist framework ([1990](#)), this represents a deeply rooted form of oppression in which colonial and patriarchal structures operate simultaneously to silence women even before they are able to speak for themselves.

The loss of youth here signifies not merely the loss of age, but the loss of an existential right to become fully human. Palestinian women are denied the right to author their own futures, as they are erased from historical narratives by colonial power and dominant patriarchal culture. The metaphor of "swallowed buds" vividly represents the loss of childhood and youth caused by war, in which young girls are forced to live in fear, deprivation, and violence from an early age. Through this symbol, Tuqan conveys that occupation does not only generate present suffering, but also confiscates the future of Palestinian women. Children inherit trauma and collective wounds, perpetuating injustice across generations ([Khamis & Dogbatse, 2025](#)).

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, the destruction of younger generations is not merely a consequence of war, but a colonial strategy aimed at weakening the future of the nation. Under these conditions, women particularly mothers and young girls become the most vulnerable group. This verse can also be understood as Tuqan's effort to record and preserve memory, ensuring that women's losses are not erased from history. Through her poetry, Tuqan asserts that even when the future appears stolen, women's experiences and memories persist as an essential component of Palestinian collective identity.

The Silencing of Women's Voices in National Resistance

The third data point, expressed in the line *على شفاه الفتيان* (On the lips of brave young women), illustrates how Palestinian women are transformed into symbols of struggle

without being granted the space to narrate that struggle themselves. Their voices are appropriated by men, and their resistance is represented by others. Historically, during the First Intifada, women played an active role in the resistance movement; however, their political participation was later marginalized by male-dominated elites and masculinist nationalist structures (Hasso, 2005). From a postcolonial feminist perspective, the prominence of masculine voices implicitly highlights the absence of women's direct representation within the nationalist discourse. As Spivak (1988) argues, subaltern women are frequently excluded from dominant modes of representation, not necessarily because they are absent from history, but because their experiences are mediated or overshadowed by more authoritative voices. In this context, the poem invites readers to consider not only who speaks, but also whose voices remain unheard within the collective narrative of resistance. This interpretation is consistent with recent scholarship arguing that Palestinian women's contributions to the national struggle have often been marginalized within dominant nationalist historiography despite their significant participation in political and social resistance (Abdullah & Hasan, 2025; Jarrad et al., 2024).

This reflects a "politics of silence" in which women appear as icons of struggle rather than as political subjects. Tuqan subtly critiques the masculine nature of Palestinian nationalism that sidelines women's voices from authentic political spaces. Moreover, the verse emphasizes that although women's voices are frequently appropriated, their presence remains crucial in sustaining resistance. This critique dismantles the illusion of representation that seemingly includes women, while in reality relegating them to rhetorical ornaments. Thus, Tuqan not only exposes suffering, but also reveals the mechanisms of power that perpetuate women's silence within formal political discourse (Morgan, 2023).

Women's Bodies as Symbols of Sacrifice

The fourth data point, represented by the line حمراء مژهوه (Red, filled with pride), depicts women's blood as a symbol of courage and sacrifice. However, this symbolism simultaneously implies the exploitation of women's bodies, whereby their bodies are reduced to instruments of struggle rather than recognized as owners of that struggle. The body becomes a sign, but not a voice. The United Nations has stated that the destruction of reproductive healthcare facilities, including maternity wards and IVF clinics, by the Israeli military constitutes an act of genocide. The shortage of sanitary products and medical supplies has further intensified women's suffering in displacement camps. Women's bodies are reduced to symbols of resistance without being granted the right to articulate their own embodied experiences. This resonates with Spivak's (1990) argument that subaltern women are denied the opportunity to speak about their own bodily experiences and are instead forced into symbolic roles predetermined by dominant narratives.

Silence as a Strategy of Resistance

The fifth data point, represented by the line تخترق الظلام والجدران (Piercing through darkness and walls), illustrates a form of resistance that is not overt, yet profoundly powerful. Palestinian women, although silenced and surrounded by fear, continue to search for spaces through which they can express themselves. They do not engage in frontal resistance because such space is unavailable; instead, they employ strategies of silence and endurance as forms of struggle. This constitutes a mode of symbolic resistance, in which women utilize silence as a means of survival. A report by Middle East Eye (2022) indicates that 80% of women suffer from severe anxiety, 70% from depression, and approximately half experience post-traumatic stress as a result of prolonged conflict. Nevertheless, they continue to seek ways to speak not through direct confrontation, but through strategies of survival, including literary expression and poetry. Spivak (1988)

describes this phenomenon as “women speak, but are not heard.” In this context, poetry becomes an alternative channel through which cries long trapped within the body can be released. Through poetic language, marginalized women are able to voice their experiences, even if only within a limited aesthetic space.

Thus, silence in this verse can be interpreted as a subtle yet profound strategy of resistance, demonstrating that silence itself can function as a meaningful language of defiance. Within postcolonial feminist discourse, this silence is not a sign of powerlessness, but a survival strategy that enables women to continue existing amid repression ([Meroka & Mutua, 2022](#)). The strength of this strategy lies in its capacity to resist invisibility: women who appear silent are, in fact, actively producing meaning through poetic signs. Consequently, this verse not only signifies suffering, but also records one of the most subtle forms of resistance one that is often overlooked by dominant narratives.

The Female Body as an Archive of Resistance

The sixth data point, expressed in the line *بدمي أخط وصيتي* (With my blood I write my testament), constitutes a powerful statement about how women’s bodies become both witnesses to and instruments of history. Palestinian women inscribe their legacy of struggle not with words, but with wounds and blood. This represents a form of writing with the body, reflecting extraordinary courage as well as bitter compulsion. Reports from *The Washington Post* ([2024](#)) and the United Nations reveal that detained Palestinian women frequently experience sexual violence, strip searches, physical abuse, and degrading photography disseminated as a form of humiliation. Spivak emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between re-presentation and representation ([Suandi, 2024](#)). In this context, Fadwa Tuqan’s poetry provides a space of representation, allowing suppressed female experiences to be rearticulated. The testament written in blood is not merely a message to the future, but a warning that women’s bodies carry traces of struggle that must not be ignored. Women are not merely witnesses; they are authors of history in its rawest and most honest form.

In this verse, the female body functions as an archive of resistance that refuses erasure, as each wound stands as concrete evidence against the colonial attempt to eliminate history. Writing a testament in blood also highlights the interconnection between personal and collective life: individual female experiences are transformed into collective messages for the nation. Through this mechanism, Tuqan transforms the fragile body into a historical medium, ensuring that women’s experiences are not confined to private memory but transmitted to future generations. Thus, the verse affirms the body as an alternative text whose existence cannot be denied; while words may be erased, the wounds on women’s bodies remain as authentic archives. In this sense, the female body in the poem becomes a living archive that operates as symbolic resistance against colonial efforts to erase history.

Women as Guardians of Collective Resistance

The seventh data point, conveyed in the line *أن تحفظوا لي ثورتِي* (So that you may preserve my revolution), demonstrates that Palestinian women do not remain confined to the position of victims. They are aware of their historical role in the collective struggle and consciously entrust that spirit to subsequent generations. This reflects a high level of historical and political consciousness, positioning women as active and strategic subjects. Many women have become activists, journalists, and documenters of events, despite facing threats of assassination, as seen in cases such as Awdah Hathaleen, who was killed after recording Israeli settler violence. According to Spivak, this represents an affirmation that subaltern women are capable of reclaiming authority over their own narratives ([Sani, 2023](#)). They are no longer merely written by others, but actively write themselves into history. In this poem, women are not only bearers of wounds, but also

custodians of hope. They sustain the spirit of resistance through memory, symbolic inheritance, and the power of language that challenges structural silencing.

These verses conclude the poem by affirming that Palestinian women do not merely survive, but also transmit the narrative of resistance as a collective legacy that cannot be severed by colonial or patriarchal power (Busbridge, 2024). The act of entrusting the revolution underscores the intergenerational dimension of struggle: women are not only preservers of memory, but also creators of new strategies that ensure the continuity of resistance in the future. By entrusting the revolution, Tuqan also emphasizes that resistance is not solely expressed through physical or military action, but through cultural and symbolic processes transmitted via language, memory, and artistic expression. This highlights women's position as guardians of national continuity and as agents shaping the direction of future struggle.

From this analysis, it can be concluded that Fadwa Tuqan's poetry successfully represents Palestinian women as subaltern subjects experiencing double oppression, while simultaneously demonstrating their resilience through symbols, bodies, and language. Within Spivak's theoretical framework, women in the poem are not only victims, but also agents of resistance who reclaim narrative authority and identity. Thus, Tuqan's poetry affirms that Palestinian women's resistance does not always manifest in physical or military forms, but also through symbolic and linguistic practices that document suffering while expanding the horizons of cultural resistance.

4. CONCLUSION

This study answers the research question by demonstrating that in *إليهم وراء القضبان*, Fadwa Tuqan represents Palestinian women as subaltern subjects whose marginalization operates through two intersecting structures: colonial domination and patriarchal control. The poem constructs this double oppression through images of confinement, silencing, and restricted mobility, which reflect epistemic and structural forms of exclusion. However, the analysis also reveals that Tuqan does not leave these women within passive victimhood. Through symbolic language, collective voice, and resistant imagery, the poem reclaims space for articulation and transforms subaltern silence into a poetic strategy of resistance. Thus, Palestinian women are represented not merely as objects of oppression, but as active agents who sustain national identity and collective memory within conditions of occupation.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is limited to a single poem by Fadwa Tuqan and therefore does not seek to generalize the representation of Palestinian women across her entire literary corpus or Palestinian resistance literature more broadly. Second, the findings are based on hermeneutic close reading, which inevitably involves interpretive subjectivity despite being systematically guided by textual evidence and postcolonial feminist theory. Third, because the analysis relies on English translations alongside the original Arabic text, the interpretation remains dependent on translation choices, particularly in relation to metaphor, symbolism, and gendered expressions. Finally, this study recognizes the theoretical tension within Spivak's concept of the subaltern, especially regarding the question of whether subaltern voices can truly be represented without being re-mediated through intellectual interpretation.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to postcolonial feminist and subaltern scholarship by demonstrating that Tuqan's poetry does not simply illustrate Spivak's proposition that the subaltern cannot speak. Rather, it suggests that poetry functions as a symbolic and aesthetic space in which marginalized women negotiate visibility, agency, and historical memory without fully escaping the structural conditions of subalternity. In this sense, the study argues that literary discourse complicates, rather than merely applies, Spivak's framework by showing that subaltern voices may become partially

audible through poetic representation while remaining constrained by broader colonial and patriarchal structures. Future research could extend this argument through comparative analyses of Tuqan's wider corpus and other Palestinian women's literary works across different historical periods and genres.

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Authors' Contribution

The authors collaboratively contributed to the conception and design of the study. Data collection, close reading, and thematic analysis were conducted systematically, followed by interpretation within the framework of postcolonial feminism and subaltern theory. The manuscript was drafted, critically reviewed, and revised to ensure theoretical coherence, methodological rigor, and academic clarity. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

AI Generative Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used *OpenAI's ChatGPT* solely to improve the academic language, grammar, and overall readability of the manuscript. The AI tool was not used to generate research data, perform data analysis, interpret the findings, develop theoretical arguments, or formulate the conclusions. All research design, analytical decisions, interpretations, and the final content of the manuscript were developed, verified, and approved by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the work.

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