

## Arab Female Prison Discourse

**Dr. Diana Obeid**

Christopher Newport University, United States

### Abstract

In the Arab world, the struggles for women's rights and freedom of expression have faced numerous obstacles. Among those who have boldly challenged societal norms through the power of written words are Arab women writers. Unfortunately, some of these courageous voices have found themselves silenced and imprisoned.

Arab women's writing is in itself a revolution, a resistance, and a rebellion against a patriarchal society. It signifies the breaking of political, religious, and social taboos. The writings about the state's atrocities moved the narrative from the private to the public arena, and this reframing is hugely significant politically because they turned from acts meant to dehumanize the prisoners to pieces of evidence against the communities that perpetuated violence. These writings then were key to raise awareness and condemnation of the state because they were reframed. The production of female delinquency affects all women, for the label of female "deviancy" is often already ascribed when a woman "steps out" of dominant gender roles, i.e., when she becomes "guilty" of breaking "moral" rules rather than criminal ones. Hence, the necessity of conforming, of being "disciplined," with regards to gender roles seems more pressing for women, and the failure to do so has more detrimental consequences for women than it had for men. This paper explores the experiences of Arab women writers in political prisons, using Michel Foucault's theories as a framework to analyze power dynamics, resistance, and self-expression in three works by female prison writers: Nawal al-Saadawi's *Mudhakarati fi Sijn al-Nisa'* (2019),<sup>59</sup> Zaynab al-Ghazali's *Ayyam min Hayati* (1999),<sup>60</sup> and Hiba al-Dabbagh's *Khams Daqa'iq wa Hasb: Tis' Sanawat fi Sujun Surya* (2007).<sup>61</sup>

By examining the intersection of gender, politics, and imprisonment, this paper aims to shed light on the unique challenges faced by Arab women writers in political prisons and their strategies of resistance. One of the questions this paper asks: how do disciplinary practices engender the bodies of women? Drawing on Foucault's concepts of power-knowledge,

surveillance, and resistance, the research investigates how power operates within the carceral system and its impact on the writing and self-expression of Arab women prisoners. It examines the disciplinary mechanisms employed in political prisons and the ways in which constant surveillance affects the creativity and agency of these writers. Furthermore, this study delves into the narratives and writings produced by Arab women writers as acts of resistance. By analyzing their prison literature, it explores how these writers challenge dominant discourses and reclaim their voices within oppressive systems.

**Keywords:** political prisons; prison literature; Gender roles; Female Delinquency, Arab women; Foucault