

Patriarchal Residue in Mainstream Feminist Texts

Saif Mahmood Mahim
Department of English & Humanities
Brac University
Dhaka, Bangladesh
Email:mahmoodsaif294@gmail.com

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Abstract

To identify the subtle traces of patriarchal influence woven throughout their narratives, this paper critically analyses some of the most influential feminist literature from the Western canon. It emphasizes the pressing necessity to recognize and address the subliminal patriarchal promotion fostered by these essential literary works. This study aims to investigate and analyze these texts to expose the pervasive patriarchal overtones that can be found in even the most acclaimed works of feminist literature and to spark discussion about the unintended repercussions of their promotion. This study tries to improve our comprehension of the larger socio-cultural setting in which feminism functions by highlighting the sneaky existence of patriarchal influence. We can participate in the critical discussion to confront these engrained biases and work toward more inclusive and equitable feminist discourse by recognizing the subliminal promotion of patriarchy within significant feminist books. The study finally promotes a new commitment to intersectionality and the empowerment of different voices by encouraging readers and academics to reexamine canonical feminist works.

Keywords: Western literature, patriarchal influence, gender roles, feminist discourse, critical analysis, unconscious biases, power structures, and intersectionality

Saif Mahmood Mahim; **Email:mahmoodsaif294@gmail.com**

1. Introduction

A social or political structure in which men are in positions of authority and women are mostly marginalized is known as patriarchy. One can ask when the subordination of women started. It started with patriarchy, and patriarchal societies have been there from the beginning as far as history is marked and acknowledged. From 8000-3000 BC, when human beings learned to form society and learned how to put agriculture in their basic survival, patriarchy was formed as a natural selection of jobs. Men were responsible for hunting and gathering, while women cared for the home and maintained the supplies (Omvedt,1987). This was the start of the division, which created a culture. One can notice that patriarchy is in the twenty-first century giving full authority to men. However, it got too profoundly implemented in our minds and consciousness that it will always be there until there is society. However, women's condition will be degraded due to this system. Patriarchy and its systems have been in development for centuries. People created the term "The new patriarchy", where they created new rules to give women a better position in society, but who are they to decide that? We want equal rights today, but how can one ask for equal rights in a patriarchal society? The term patriarchal society is a paradox saying that men are the head of the society, and thus, women must obey them and their rules. In this paper, I will point out how the essence of a patriarchal society is present in significant feminist texts.

2. Literature Review

In the context of Indian nationalism, after the colonization of India by the British Empire, their culture got mixed with the locals because the locals (mostly men) who belonged to the higher society went for higher education and got westernized. Their creation of nationalism was mixed with the Western culture, and when they tried to put it into their culture, they created a new patriarchy. This patriarchy created new rules tagged as women's opportunities which they said were the improvement of women. They created a new margin saying women should be the protector of the home and men should run for the materialistic world and be the breadwinner (Chatterjee, 1985). This gender difference did not free women but created a new barrier to developing their authority and position in society. This became a culture, and women were kept at home in this context that they had to save the home and their chastity for the betterment of their family as it is connected with spirituality. What kind of freedom is that? How can protecting spirituality and not being educated and working for the betterment can be unhealthy for a family rather than prospering the family? This is how patriarchy is the main barrier to women's development.

Imperialism must always be mentioned in any understanding of the East-West interaction. Not only is imperialism an essential economic, political, and social setting in which many cultures and peoples can coexist with one another, but also to comprehend the power imbalance that this contact has primarily characterized. It also provides the context for knowledge that explains Eastern reality to the West, and thus, it began to emerge in which these countries could participate in the global power structures (Kittell, 2010). While making colonies, the imperialists introduced their culture and viewed it as superior. It mixed with the local culture, but their views also created barriers. The "worlding" of what is now referred to as "the Third World" would be depicted in literary history if these "facts" were recognized not only in the study of British literature but also in the study of the works of literature of the European conquering cultures of the great age of imperialism. It encourages the emergence of "the Third World" as a signifier that allows us to forget that "worlding," even as it expands the empire of the literary discipline, to think of the Third World as distant cultures that have been exploited but have rich intact literary heritages waiting to be recovered, interpreted, and circularized in English translation (Spivak, 1985). Patriarchy and imperialism got into people's minds like it has been there forever because they turned into culture. Primary feminist texts written by English authors contain their culture where patriarchy is a significant part that cannot be unseen. Thus, their consciousness and beliefs were also forged within the patriarchy's boundaries. One's culture, starting with how their parents treat and communicate with them, and continuing through every kind of communication that the culture employs, almost entirely shapes their awareness and sense of identity. Beginning with conception, our surroundings and genetic makeup entirely shape who we are. The complex construct known as "self-image" is created by accepting thoughts and pictures, primarily thoughts of other people.

3. Analysis

Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* is known as one of the critical and significant feminist texts because of its rebellious nature and concentration on the characters' self-improvement over life and consciousness. There is no doubt it is the beginning of how women should step in and work for their self-improvement, but even in *Jane Eyre*, the presence of a patriarchal society is noticeable. Jane is a rebellious woman, and from the beginning, it is clear how she fought with Mrs Reed's son, whom she called Master Reed because he was abusive to her. Master Reed hit Jane on her face with the book she brought from the library. Jane then fought back at a point and was confined to an empty room called the "red room". She was meant to be a good girl who knew manners. However, her aunt Mrs Reed said she was nothing like a Victorian woman and could not be like that (Bronte, 1847). Who created the rule that women should be polite and never misbehave with men or have such a mischievous attitude? It is not Jane's aunt, but it is the society, and the society is patriarchal.

Moreover, at the time of the Victorian era, women who were educated could reach the position of Governess, which was the main achievement they could have. However, all the other sectors connected to politics or science were not accessible to women. Jane accepted that it was as far as she could go and joined as a governess. Furthermore, when Jane was sent to Lowood Institution, they were taught English, History, Music and sewing (Bronte,1847). They were taught to be a good household so that they could be a good housewife, and Jane was bound to be in that system because the system was created by patriarchy, and it was a culture for women decided by the patriarchal system. In my opinion, *Jane Eyre* should not only be read from the feminist perspective but also from the angle where patriarchy is to be blamed as the main barrier to women's development. Secondly, when Mrs Reed invited Mr Brocklehurst to talk about Jane and her admission to Lowood Institution, Brocklehurst asked Jane if she knew anything from the Bible and judged her with the knowledge of her religion. It felt like women are the ones who should be with spirituality and have to preserve it. These same attributes of patriarchal society can be found in Indian nationalism because the culture of colonization was promoted during their reign. Once Brocklehurst visited Lowood institution and became rude to Miss Temple for providing more bread and butter to the children. He said women should care about what they eat, and excessive eating is a flaw (Bronte,1847). Miss Temple, a strong character herself, could not say anything against that, or maybe the author did not want to protest against the system because it is how society worked. One of the biggest reasons women at that time could not participate in essential posts for jobs was because of their education system. They were not taught any important and impactful subjects like science or commerce. Thus, they could not participate in other jobs because they lacked requirements. Women are not involved in these subjects because of the patriarchal education system created by men.

Esther Greenwood, a college student aspiring to become a poet, is profiled in *The Bell Jar*. She is chosen for a one-month summer job as a guest editor of the *Ladies' Day* magazine, but her stay in New York City is unfulfilling since she battles with identity and social expectations. Patriarchy is everywhere, whether it is in a City or a town. When she was living in Boston, she had a boyfriend named Buddy, and they were in a good relationship until she saw Buddy moulded with the patriarchal system. Buddy wants to marry her as soon as possible, but patriarchy can be found here through the novel's male characters. Buddy said he had no problem with Esther writing poetry, but then he added that she could do it when the children were asleep and she had much free time(Plath,1963). Poetry is not created like that; poetry is divine, which an artist creates with all her senses and emotions. This attribute of Buddy is the creation of the Patriarchal system of society.

Moreover, when Esther moved to New York, she faced the harsh reality of the patriarchal society. She went to a party with her friend where she met a famous DJ who later took both of them to his place and became sexually attached to her friend. She fled the house and went to her hotel, where she found this system very odd: women are treated very lowly and objectified from every angle. Later, when she wants to ignore the fact that society is abusing women, she goes to another party where she gets introduced to a Caribbean gentleman named Marco, who dances with her. Ultimately, he wants to marry her and take her to the Caribbean for a better life. These were all fake promises to get sexually attached to Esther, and in the end, that night became a terrible memory for her as Marco abused her sexually and Physically(Plath,1963). This encounter with men created a vast negative impact on Esther's mind which made her hysterical.

Why do men have to create this pressure on women? What makes them think that women are less human beings and they are just sexual objects? This is how patriarchy gave men the upper hand and an important position in society, that they started to ignore women as human beings because of their alter ego and masculinity. Even the feminist writers who wanted to create awareness for women and wanted equality ended up describing the horrific nature of a patriarchal society. Not just the male but the female characters in *The Bell Jar* are the creation of a patriarchal society. Esther's mother was a woman who was always concerned about her daughter's chastity and behaviour. She wrote a letter describing how a perfect woman should be and why a woman must protect her chastity and behave well (Plath,1963). Who created these rules? Even though such rules harm women in many aspects, another woman who faced the patriarchal system also wants her daughter to be the same, and this is how patriarchy is still alive throughout culture and generations. Lastly, when Esther thought she could finally be a poet and get experience from her mentor from *The Lady's* magazine, she was heartbroken by the mentor's behaviour because she continuously changed her thoughts about writing. After all, she wanted society to love Esther's poem, which created more damage than anything else. Who suffered from this system? Her mother does not bring on Esther's depression; instead, it is the inadequacy of her desire for independence and her determination to avoid having a man define her in terms of her sex, finances, and career in cold war America. Her expectations and self-perceptions could only align with those imposed by her society, where women repeatedly heard from voices of tradition and Freudian sophistication that their only possible aspiration was to exalt their own femininity.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette's "madness" can be interpreted as a social phenomenon; she is driven "mad" by her patriarchal husband. Her "madness" is a consequence of Mr Rochester's oppression in a diseased patriarchal society, a society that allows and accepts cruelties towards women. In my opinion, Rochester is a victim of patriarchal society himself. He was forced to marry Antoinette by his father because of the rule of inheritance of property. When he went to Jamaica, he instantly got creolized by the environment and Antoinette. Rochester, who grew up seeing the glory of the British Empire and its patriarchal system, did not like

Jamaica. He felt much suffocated encountering the natural beauty and how he was not a dominating figure there.

The patriarchal society made him think that their culture was what England is and he can conquer anything he wants to. What caused the problem here is that Rochester was not pleased with Antoinette and her culture, which later became a curse for Antoinette. Antoinette, at one point, thought that maybe England is actually very glorious, as her husband is saying it. Here Antoinette believes in the fact that her husband is right when she becomes the victim of patriarchy. The same creolization happened to Antoinette when she went to Thornfield Hall, and nothing was true about what she thought of. She saw nothing but four walls, and the description she gave was horrific. She didn't like the life England provided her. Later it made her hysterical and mad. She was treated like a prisoner in her own house. What made her that? What created the madwoman in the attic? Why was she kept like that? All of it is connected with the patriarchal society where both Rochester and Antoinette are victims. Moreover, after the death of Antoinette's father, they were being marginalized. A father is the representative of the family, but why would others be treated as nobody? Lastly, Antoinette always wanted to be like Tia because they consume the same food and take baths in the same river. Antoinette thinks she may be like Tia. This is not the case, though.

The fact that Antoinette and her family are outsiders is revealed in an earlier section, ironically, from Tia herself. The "white nigger," who is "poor like a beggar," is how Tia refers to Antoinette (Rhys,1966). Tia serves as Antoinette's "looking glass" and mirror in this image, which is crucial to the story. Tia is the mirror that casts the hot stone of realization, reflecting Antoinette's ethnic difference and the fact that she is and has always been a colonial refugee. So, Antoinette's tears of recognition are also Tia's tears: "I felt as though I saw myself(Forrester,1994). Tia was the one constantly reminding the fact that Antoinette is nothing but a victim of the patriarchal society and colonization. The theme of patriarchy has always been clearly portrayed in important feminist texts because it was not only a feminist text but a voice against the patriarchal society.

After analyzing these texts, one thing became clear to me feminist writings carry a theme of a patriarchal society because it is what they are writing against, and this system is the main problem. No matter how much women fight for equality, there can never be equality until society and culture are rebuilt. The patriarchal society will always find a way to dominate women. One can say that women all over the world are free now, but are they really? Who is creating the rules of our society, and what men and women should do? It's the patriarchal system. Women's condition has indeed developed a lot doesn't mean everyone is in that category. Women who are educated can pull themselves up in the hierarchy, but what about women who are deprived of education? Why should they be in darkness? Can there ever be equality in this patriarchal society? Patriarchal systems are the same over the whole world, but their domination differs from an individual perspective. Here I have to bring Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain and her feminist short story *Sultana's Dream*. In her story, she totally excluded patriarchal society and presented a society from a woman's perspective. She explained how things would be easier for women, and maybe that is the only text where one can say that the presence of patriarchy is not acknowledged. The text did exclude patriarchal society, but people will still connect it as it is one of the biggest attributes which is missing from the text. Thus, can any literary piece exclude a patriarchal society? We live in a society, and all living things form society, and no one can exclude anything from it. One can either highlight it by talking against it, or they can exclude it totally. Still, a patriarchal society will exist, but we can change our thoughts and views towards women and give them their proper rights and dignity as human beings and free entities while respecting their way of life.

4. Conclusion

This study advances knowledge of the intricate connection between feminism and patriarchy by shedding light on the subtly present patriarchy in critical feminist writings. It is intended to combat the subliminal propagation of patriarchal notions and serve as a call to action for readers, academics, and writers to work towards a more fair and inclusive feminist movement. We can only open the door for a feminist discourse that destroys the repressive systems of patriarchy by doing this critical analysis. This research identifies situations where feminist authors unintentionally reinforce patriarchal ideas by thoroughly analyzing representative texts. The examination focuses on how female protagonists are portrayed, interact with their male counterparts, and how traditional gender norms are maintained. It reveals how even well-known feminist writings support ideas about women's dependence on males for approval and their local agency.

About the Author

Saif Mahmood Mahim is a 4th-year Brac University student majoring in English literature and minoring in History. Alongside his academic pursuits, Saif is gaining invaluable experience as an intern at the Centre for Peace and Justice (CPJ) and as a student tutor for the School of General Education at Brac University. He is the first intern under the “Riedwan Aritro” internship launched on April 13th, 2023. He is researching for Princeton University’s Global History Lab (GHL) on themes of citizenship and minorities concerning Communal Violence in Bangladesh.

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