

Patriarchal Oppression in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* (2019)

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Abstract

The article claims that *The Testaments* (2019) by Margaret Atwood critiques patriarchal society by showing that the network of women is able to subvert institutionalized Othering. Although previous studies have reviewed Gilead's oppression and acts of resistance by individuals, the specific ontological mechanism of women's movement from imposed immanence to collective transcendence, as implemented by Atwood through her multi-voiced narrative, remains under-researched. To investigate the first-person narratives of Aunt Lydia, Agnes Jemima, and Daisy, this research combines Simone de Beauvoir's Existentialist Feminism and Catherine Belsey's Post-Structuralist analysis in order to adopt a qualitative approach. It is stated in the study's findings that Gilead's oppression is based on five systems acting together: deprivation of language, spatial enclosure, biological essentialism, hierarchy among women, and systemic violence. The results show that Agnes' epistemological unlearning based on literacy, Lydia's subversion of the archive, as well as Daisy's crossing of the border contribute to transcendence of the characters. The perspective taken is that Atwood's poetic narrative construction is at variance with authoritarian discourse by reinstating the epistemic significance of female experience. The research also makes the recommendation that Feminist theorists pay particular attention to what ontological metamorphosis entails in its processes because Atwood's idea of networked resistance that includes intergenerational solidarity, documentation, and complicit action opens a window to modern-day issues of fighting new authoritarianism.

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1. Introduction

By placing Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* (2019) within the development of Feminist literary theory and Simone de Beauvoir Existentialist philosophy, this introduction lays the groundwork for an analytical study of the book. By portraying the Republic of Gilead as a totalizing patriarchal society, the chapter uses the dialectic of the Subject vs. the Other to demonstrate how women are frequently denied agency and held in a state of immanence. In addition to the oppression caused by men, it offers a study challenge that explores the complex power dynamics that exist among women, especially through the role of the aunts. Through the three distinct narrative voices of Aunt Lydia, Agnes, and Daisy, the chapter seeks to explore the shift from individual grief to collective, deliberate opposition. This introduction

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concludes by offering a framework for analyzing Atwood's opposition against patriarchal tyranny.

As a social movement and an intellectual tradition, Feminism is a basic critique of patriarchal structures that have traditionally excluded women by limiting their autonomy, rights, and opportunities. Feminism, which emerged from the philosophical and political revolutions of the Enlightenment, promotes the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes and aims to completely destroy the systems that uphold gender-based oppression rather than only reform them (Beauvoir, 1949). Feminism is "a oppression rather than only reform them (Beauvoir, 1949). Feminism is "a movement to eradicate sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression," a fight that is inclusive of all genders and aims to achieve a more just and equitable society(hooks, 2000). Along with calling for similar rights and privileges for men and women, Feminist Theory underscores how important women's identity, experience, and voices have been in the understanding of social reality and progress of humanity.

The notion of "intersectionality", first introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw in her article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex (1989) saying that fighting gender discrimination is not possible without considering such categories as race, class, or disability, became widely known in modern Feminist Discourse due to the desire to uncover the cognitive significance of variables. Despite the fact that it is important to see that women's experiences are often seen from the lenses of a privileged viewpoint, this transformation might disregard suppressed voices in the movement. Feminism thus changes into a critique of power by employing an intersectional perspective and fighting for abolishment of the whole "matrix of domination" (Collins, 2000).

Feminist literary theory, a significant product of this movement, provides vital analytical instruments for comprehending gender disparities and examining the role of cultural, social, and political factors in the oppression of women. Moreover, it calls into question the so-called objectivity of literary canon as well as cultural discourses, discovering the power relations they embody (Tong, 2009). Within the literary criticism context, Feminist theory investigates the representation of women in literary canon, where women are typically represented as voiceless or stereotypical characters. It also studies the struggle of authors in dealing with patriarchal constraints, as well as the degree of influence of different narrative forms in contributing to gender hierarchies or opposing them (Showalter,1977). Consequently, literature becomes not merely a reflection of the realities of society but rather a vibrant arena of the production and contestation of gender ideas.

The basis for the understanding of this concept is the concept of The Other created by Simone de Beauvoir, who elaborated on that idea in her 1949 work *The Second Sex*. According to Beauvoir's existentialist interpretation, Western culture and thinking put forward an idea in which men serve as the subject (the being whose existential essence is established) while women are the Other (the object of the subject's actions). The current understanding of the Other corresponds to the definition of a person having the status of the Other, which implies their being object, exception, and unneeded entity. Beauvoir states that the nature of women

and the limit imposed by social roles on women, making them mother, wife, or caregiver contribute to women's lack of ability to transcend the boundaries defined. In contrast, women remain in a state of immanence this means that their existence remains controlled by nature and becomes repetitive. What is of primary importance in Beauvoir's argument is that she states that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 2011) meaning that femininity and subordination are learned rather than innate.

Margaret Atwood's 2019 sequel to her 1985 classic *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Testaments* (2019), offers a modern literary context for analyzing the features of female resistance and the workings of patriarchal oppression. The dystopian Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian theocracy that has taken over the former United States, is expanded in the book. In addition to being a backward society, Gilead is a totalizing system of institutional and ideological control in which patriarchal dominance is upheld by widespread surveillance, ritualized violence, and psychological terror, and it is justified by an extreme interpretation of religious doctrine. Gilead oppression aims to control every aspect of women's lives, including their bodies as reproductive vessels, their voices through forced silence, and their futures through strict caste systems like Handmaids, Wives, Marthas, and Aunts. This is in contrast to the domestic confinement typical of 19th-century patriarchy. The texts subtle ecofeminist elements, where women's dominance parallels and intersects with nature's dominance, and where characters like Agnes and Aunt Lydia engage in subversive observation or writing that can be interpreted as forms of resistance to dual patriarchal mastery over female bodies and the environment, have also been identified by recent scholarship.

The Testaments (2019) offers a multidimensional, poly-vocal analysis of life under and resistance to this regime through three independent first-person tales. The narrators are Daisy, a Canadian adolescent who learns she is the baby Nicole, a symbolic figure smuggled out of Gilead, and becomes a refugee and resistance agent, Agnes Jemima, a young woman raised in Gilead strictures who believes in its doctrines until a crisis of faith and Aunt Lydia, a high-ranking enforcer of Gilead laws who surreptitiously documents its corruption. Atwood creates a story of networked, multigenerational, and strategic resistance through these linked narratives rather than one of alone, valiant defiance. The emphasis moves from *The Handmaid's Tale* internal psychological survival to a more external, group-based, and practical struggle for structural reform.

1.2 Statement of Problem

The central problem this study addresses is how women in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* are systematically forced into the role of "The Other" a term Simone de Beauvoir (1949) used to describe those denied their own identity and freedom. In the Republic of Gilead, men are constructed as powerful Subjects who make all the rules, while women are treated as objects defined only by their biological and domestic functions. A critical research gap is that while previous studies have focused on Gilead's patriarchal structures and women's individual resistance strategies, they have not examined how women move from imposed immanence to collective transcendence and how Atwood's polyphonic narrative formalizes

this process. Moreover, the complicated power dynamics among women, especially through the concept of Aunts, need more detailed examination to highlight how intra-gender hierarchies sustain oppression.

1.3 Research Objectives

1) To analyze patriarchy as portrayed in *The Testaments* (2019) as a system that places women in the position of the Other and identify how female protagonists shift from acting individually to acting collectively against the patriarchal regime of Gilead.

2) To assess how Atwood narrative strategy and poly-vocal structure formally enact the subversion of patriarchal discourse and the reclamation of female subjectivity.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The present research adds to the body of knowledge on literary criticism by analyzing how patriarchal power structures control the bodies, identity, and freedom of women in Atwood's narrative. The research illustrates how patriarchy is normalized, enforced, and opposed, which makes this study relevant to those who study the theory of critique, gender politics, and dystopian literature. Using a feminist approach, this research illustrates how literature can act against patriarchal structures contributing to the ongoing discussion of how women are oppressed and resist in the modern world.

2. Literature Review

Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949/2011) is one of the major theories on which this analysis is built. Beauvoir states that women are constructed as Others and denied an independent existence in the patriarchal societies where men are constructed as Subjects. Moreover, women are not subjugated because of their biological nature but because of the social construction. These theories can be illustrated by the theories of Beauvoir about the notions of immanence and transcendence: the former indicates the ways in which women are trapped into domestication and reproduction, whereas the latter stands for freedom, creation, and power of men. The ideas of Toril Moi (2008) elaborate Beauvoir's thoughts on the impossibility for women to become Subjects within patriarchy.

Feminist literary criticism offers an insightful lens through which to explore the role of literature in depicting and opposing patriarchal oppression. Elaine Showalter (1977) noted that gynocriticism is the approach that emphasizes the importance of researching women's literature as an independent literary canon. Gilbert and Gubar pointed out the way female figures are often portrayed in literature as caged, voiceless, and oppressed due to patriarchal institutions. The ideas of female caging and of female resistance can shed light on the functions of female characters in *The Testaments*.

Numerous scholars claim that patriarchal power lies in its possibility to control knowledge and restrict women's education and language. In her research of epistemic injustice, Miranda Fricker shows how women lose their credibility and cannot create knowledge because of

patriarchal power. Rachel Bernstein describes Gilead's educational system as "epistemic brutality" because women are forbidden to read and write. In the same way depriving women of literacy means depriving them of their possibility to understand and resist the power of patriarchy.

In recent research, the focus on testimonial, memories, and documentation has gained prominence as a form of resistance in *The Testaments*. Staels (2022) argue that Aunt Lydia's archive is a strong resistance tool since it documents evidence of the injustices committed in Gilead. Korkka (2024) points out that the use of various narrators in the book challenges the official history of the state by giving alternative views from females. Wagner (2025) further asserts that testimonies allow women to recover their subjectivities and reveal patriarchal oppression.

Yet another important field of study analyzes how patriarchies work via the agency of women themselves. According to Staels (2022), Aunt Lydia appears to be a controversial personality because she assists and finally works against Gilead. Referring to the notion of the "banality of evil" proposed by Hannah Arendt, Kaufman (2025) maintains that the Aunts legitimize oppression through the fulfillment of bureaucratic functions. At the same time, scholars note that women ultimately work to dismantle those oppressive systems through collaboration and collective resistance. The cases of Aunt Lydia, Agnes, and Daisy prove that even though patriarchy alienates women from each other, unity becomes necessary.

Although previous studies have explored Beauvoir's theory of the Other, feminist literary criticism, epistemic injustice, archival resistance, and female complicity, few studies have integrated these perspectives to examine how patriarchal oppression transforms women from passive Others into active Subjects in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*. This study fills that gap by combining Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism with Catherine Belsey's post-structuralist textual analysis to investigate how Atwood represents patriarchal oppression and the gradual transformation of women through resistance, agency, and collective action.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine meaning, subjectivity, and resistance in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*. The qualitative approach was appropriate since the research questions aim to understand the functioning of patriarchal oppression and the development of resistance questions requiring close attention to language, discourse, and symbolic meaning. Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* (2019) was the primary source of data. Using Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism and Catherine Belsey's post-structuralist textual analysis allowed the study to investigate both the ontological elements of patriarchal oppression, but also the language of patriarchal oppression.

As far as the philosophical foundation of the paper is concerned, Simone de Beauvoir has been the source. Following the existentialist principle which states that existence comes before essence, Beauvoir (2011) argues men are born without any essence and are free to be whoever they want to be, unlike women who are deprived of this right. Society imposes a feminine

essence on women early in their lives, which forces them into believing that they should be a certain kind of person, which is contrary to their nature. The relations between the Subject and the Other serve as the basis of the concept of subjectivity, where the male subject identifies himself as an Absolute Subject therefore rendering the female to be an Other, defined exclusively by men. Immanence signifies the stagnant state of being, whereas transcendence is believed to be the inherent will of every human being.

Catherine Belsey: *Textual Analysis and The Questioning Text*. In *Critical Practice* (2002) Belsey gives her method. Belsey criticizes the theory of expressive realism, according to which literature simply represents reality, saying that instead language shapes our understanding of the world. A vital point is the distinction between the two types of text: the declarative text gives a 'closed and unified' view represented in a compliant way. The interrogative text, in its turn, 'invites the reader to answer questions': (Belsey, 2002). The polyphonic structure of the interrogative text stops one voice from being the dominant one, thus making the text subversive in nature.

Data Analysis

Patriarchal Oppression and the Transformation from the Other to Collective Resistance

In this part, Research Question 1 is addressed: What is the role of patriarchal tyranny in the role of women as Other, and what is the transition from personal resistance to collective resistance? This part fulfills the first objective of the research by portraying the way Gilead has turned women into the Other, and how the female characters go back to their status as individuals. The research uses the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir on the concepts of the Subject and the Other and the approach of self-determination of Catherine Belsey. The research proves that male dominance in the novel works through biological oppression, surveillance, literacy deprivation, and ideological control while the resistance is achieved through gaining knowledge, witnessing, and acting together.

In her work, Margaret Atwood portrays Gilead as a male-dominated society that strips women of their independence and subsequently confines them to their roles as wives and mothers. Agnes recalls saying: "We were beautiful flowers kept in a glass house... We were the vessels of the future" (Atwood, 2019, p. 12). According to Simone de Beauvoir (2011), woman is defined exclusively in relation with man, who is regarded as the Subject, while woman is viewed as the Other. The concept of "vessel" is illustrative in the sense that patriarchal ideology forces women to turn into biological instruments instead of keeping their personalities and autonomy. In accordance with Belsey's observations, this discourse confines women's identity to a language that denies them the right to define their own destiny. The idea is fixed by Gilead practices related to eternal observation, lack of education and literacy that provides patriarchy with additional guarantees to secure its power. The role of Aunt Lydia is seen in this context as she explains: "A woman who could read was a woman who could think, and a woman who could think was a danger" (Atwood, 2019, p. 35). Thus, education becomes a means of political oppression in these instances.

Nevertheless, Atwood demonstrates that patriarchal systems of oppression can be overturned. The transition from the Other to the Subject begins when women gain access to agency, knowledge, and language. Aunt Lydia gathers the secret records of the crimes committed by Gilead, whereas Agnes gains literacy and realizes how she is oppressed ideologically; in turn, Daisy has knowledge of freedom that she manages to take with her abroad. Acts of resistance become connected and finally turn into a fight against the regime, while Agnes states that it was through learning to read that she was able to see the forced reality of Gilead, and Daisy refers to herself as "the outside coming in to let the inside out" (Atwood, 2019, p. 254), thus undermining patriarchal discourse. The book climaxes when Agnes and Daisy understand their common identity and unite with Aunt Lydia, who has been keeping her hidden behind-the-scenes story. They become aware that "We were two halves of a story that had been torn in two. Together, we were the whole truth" (Atwood, 2019, p. 312), which refers to the emergence of collective female subjectivity. As a result, *The Testaments* demonstrates that the patriarchal oppression is not just a form of oppression, but also one that can be overcome through reading, speaking out, coming together, and rising up, with women being transformed from docile Others into self-determining Subjects.

Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* (2019) depicts Gilead as a patriarchal theocracy in which women are positioned as the Other through strict social classifications, psychological manipulation, erasure of history, and institutional control. Utilizing Simone de Beauvoir's idea of woman as the Other and Catherine Belsey's poststructuralist textual analysis, the novel explores how the patriarchal system allows for the fixed and secondary female identity but also how women move from subtle acts of resistance to organized opposition.

One of the most apparent forms of patriarchy repression in Gilead is the strict categorization of female identity into essentialist roles. Agnes maintains, "There were the Wives, the Marthas, the Aunts, and the Handmaids. Every one of them had a color, and every color contained its own meaning" (Atwood, 2019, p. 15). Amanda states that these categories prevent women from having their own identity and force them into their fixed social roles. From Belsey's perspective, the coloured uniforms work as signifiers of meaning and value before the women can define themselves. Thus, women will be seen only in terms of their utility for the patriarchy and not as independent human beings.

The domination of the patriarchy becomes reinforced by psychological manipulations, which induce women to internalize their own oppression. The regime keeps calling girls 'precious' (Atwood, 2019, p.12), so that the confinement is perceived as a sort of protection rather than as imprisonment. According to Beauvoir, the Other may consent to subordination owing to its seeming safety. The regime uses the language of care that disguises the nature of oppression as domination becomes seen as a divine duty. The textual analysis done by Belsey demonstrates how this kind of language helps hide patriarchal violence.

The state also strengthens its power by employing an institutional pyramid to create tension and rivalry among women. Aunt Lydia confesses, "We were the masters of their narrow, constrained existence" (Atwood, 2019), showing that certain women are granted partial

authority over others. In line with this idea, Beauvoir states that women's oppression keeps going because they are estranged from one another, not uniting. Similarly, Belsey argues that Gilead creates divided women who are unable to resist. Thus, by inspiring rivalry and control among women, men maintain their dominance over women and undermine the emergence of a common market for female identity.

Another important form of patriarchal oppression is the loss of women's past and identity. In particular, Agnes states, "My name was not my own name. I was given a moniker that I had to wear like a dress" (Atwood, 2019), thus emphasizing that the ownership of one's original name mirrors the loss of personal history. By this means, Gilead deprives women of their history, leaving their identity as a result of male-dominated ideology instead of a personal experience.

However, the oppressive mechanisms described in the novel are still not able to stop the change from resisting through individual actions to resistance in the form of organized action. The first act of resistance performed by Agnes is represented in her rejection of the designated role and in her claim that "I would rather become an Aunt and be a spider than a Wife and be a fly" (Atwood, 2019, p. 210). According to Beauvoir, the passage signifies a strategic passage from a state of passive immanence toward transcendence, while Belsey sees Agnes's evolving identity as a disruption of patriarchal definitions assigned to women. Resistance becomes collective using information strategically. Aunt Lydia realizes the revolutionary potential of truth when she mentions that "Information is like water; it finds the cracks. Then, after the cracks have been discovered, the dam has to collapse" (Atwood, 2019, 401). Information becomes the weapon with which Gilead's power is undermined from within. Beauvoir's understanding of transcendence is put to practice when women start to create history instead of being merely passive subjects.

The end of their joint fight happens with Agnes and Nicole going over the boundary, which means they no longer remain under the power of Gilead. As Agnes expresses, "Every step away from the border was a step into my own name" (Atwood, 2019, p. 388). The physical border crossing represents returning identity, freedom, and subjectivity. As Beauvoir believes it is only through struggle and liberation that the Self appears and for Belsey it is only through passing borders that the geographical, linguistic, and ideological limitations of patriarchy are destroyed.

Aunt Lydia's primary role has been as the main organizer of this collective resistance as she is able to convert the tools of oppression into tools for liberation. She explains that "I have planted the seeds of their ruin in the exact soil they gave me" (Atwood, 2019, p. 405) that shows how she uses the patriarchal system against itself. The high point of her resistance comes when she manages to smuggle out her testimony saying, "My microdots are tucked away... they are my messages in a bottle, cast upon the waters of the future" (Atwood, 2019, p. 408). Beauvoir sees this move as a statement of the Other who claims back her historical agency by making sure that her voice will be heard even after it has been suppressed by

patriarchy. According to Belsey, the microdots serve as signifiers that help to keep the truths that the regime wanted to erase turning the private pain into a public political statement.

In conclusion, *The Testaments* makes it apparent that patriarchal subjugation in Gilead involves social stratification, psychological conditioning, hierarchization, and historical denial, which all lead to women being put into the position of the Other. Moreover, Atwood shows that resistance begins from personal acts of survival and grows into a meaningful mass movement with solidarity, knowledge, and truth at its core. The experiences of Agnes, Nicole, and Aunt Lydia indicate that the book argues why Beauvoir was right to assert that women can gain subjectivity through their actions and freedom, while the textual framework offered by Belsey demonstrates the way the dismantling of patriarchal language and ideology brings about the end of oppressive power structure.

Narrative Voice as a Tool for Subverting Patriarchal Dominance

This section addresses Research Question 2: How can the distinct narrative voices of Aunt Lydia, Agnes, and Daisy be used to undermine gender inequality and subvert the strict dominance of the patriarchy? This brings about the conclusion of the third study aim, which is to analyze Atwood's use of multi-voiced form and narrative technique to achieve the goal of regaining female identity and deconstructing patriarchal discourse. This section provides an insight into what each character's narrative does towards subverting the patriarchal regime and providing a testimony of the female experience that cannot be silenced by the regime.

Poly-vocal narrative structure at play in *The Testaments* (2019) is the chief means to destabilize the patriarchate voice through representation of a variety of female voices. Lydia's narrative voice can be seen as a manifestation of Machiavellian deception because it shows how the oppressed can assume the role of the oppressor so as to bring down the regime from within. She records, I am the architect of my own survival, and in the process, I have become the architect of their ruin (Atwood, 2019, p. 35). According to Simone de Beauvoir, the Other is often forced into complicity to survive however, Lydia uses this complicity as a site of transcendence. According to a Belsey-inspired viewpoint, Lydia's narrative voice is a disruptive text that shows that the Other can control the symbolic order by using the patriarchy's own surveillance language to produce a counter-narrative.

By recording the dismantling of the Gileadean Myth from the viewpoint of an insider, Agnes Jemima's narrative voice provides a distinctive subversion. She captures her transformation from a subservient daughter to a rebellious Aunt-in-training as she observes: The universe they had created for me started to resemble a fragile, phony stage set the more I read (Atwood, 2019, p. 195). According to Beauvoir (2011), the Myth of Woman only endures as long as it is perceived as normal; Agnes's voice captures the instant this normalcy is revealed as a fabrication. According to Belsey (2002), a productive literature enables the reader to recognize ideological fissures. Agnes's voice serves this exact purpose, for it helps to capture that language process, which recording, as the Other stops believing in the beauty of the Ones. Nicole's (which is Jade's) voice offers an important perspective, discouraging discrimination

against women through creating a contrast between the restrictions that exist in Gilead and the democratic ideals of the outside world. Upon her enter into Gilead, she states, "It was like walking into a black-and-white movie where the audio was switched off" (Atwood, 2019, p. 268). This textual evidence highlights what Beauvoir calls the alienated subject. Nicole's voice is not colonized by Gilead's discourse, she views their patriarchal gender roles not as holy but as absurd. According to Belsey's paradigm, Nicole's story introduces intertextuality, undercutting the state's claim to absolute control by bringing the rhetoric of 21st-century human rights into conflict with Puritanical norms from the 17th century.

The way the three narratives overlap and support one another strengthens subversion even more, generating a collective subjectivity that the patriarchy is unable to stifle. Nicole muses as the three voices finally come together: "We were no longer just voices in the dark; we were a chorus" (Atwood, 2019, p. 330). According to Beauvoir, as long as the Other is alone, she will continue to be oppressed. The protagonists transition from individual Otherness to collective Subjectivity by becoming a chorus. According to Belsey (2002), a multiple text defies reduction to a single interpretation, making it intrinsically subversive. The cumulative evidence of the three voices cannot be dismissed by the patriarchal state as the hallucinations of a single woman.

Conclusion

This research examined and analyzed patriarchal oppression of women in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Testaments* (2019) was explored in the light of the theoretical approach of Simone de Beauvoir's Existentialist Feminism and Catherine Belsey's Post-Structuralist analysis of texts. The results prove that the society of Gilead maintains the patriarchal domination by means of interrelated means, including biological essentialism, language restriction, geographical isolation, hierarchical relations within the gender group, and violence, thus reducing women to the status of the Other. On the other hand, it is revealed that Atwood depicts women's struggle for freedom as the process of their gradual awakening as a community. These examples demonstrate how literacy, testimonial accounts, historical documents, and solidarity reinforce women's status and assist them in regaining their power. Moreover, it becomes clear that the polyphonic narrative technique used by Atwood can be viewed as a literary device that can be invoked against the monologic discourse of the government as well as for the restoration of multiple feminine voices. In light of this analysis that combines the theory by Beauvoir about the Subject and the Other with the textual approach by Belsey, the current paper aims at contributing to feminist literary criticism by showing the fact that identities of patriarchy are socially determined and therefore changeable, while women should emancipate themselves through the awareness of their circumstances.

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