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Challenging Patriarchy: A Critical Examination of Elfriede Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher*

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Abstract: Patriarchy, often regarded as 'male hegemony,' marginalises female identity, yet it has evolved in modern and post-modern contexts. Contemporary critics argue that hegemony can be gender-neutral, and power dynamics between exploiters and the exploited have become more fluid. Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek advocates for women's political and economic representation, viewing feminism as activism against systemic sexism rather than solely as male dominance. Her novel *The Piano Teacher* depicts this transformed patriarchy, where power operates psychologically and socially, involving both men and women. This paper explores how Jelinek deconstructs traditional ideas of patriarchy, demonstrating that dominance and subjugation are functions of social power rather than gender, and highlighting the complex interplay of oppression in contemporary society.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Feminism, Hegemony, Power, Exploitation.

Introduction

The concept of patriarchy is defined by 'male hegemony,' which makes female identity subordinate, insignificant, and unrepresentative. Due to socio-cultural, ethnic, and religious influences, the idea of patriarchy as male dominance has deep roots across various societies and communities. Feminist theorists have challenged this rigidity, shifting the discourse from individual male control to a structural system sustained by institutions, traditions and power hierarchies. Andrea Dworkin considers pornography a tool of female subjugation, while Camille Paglia questions the feminist impulse of blaming men for oppression, emphasising that women must understand themselves independently. In her recent collection of writings from 1990 to the present, *Free Women, Free Men: Sex, Gender, Feminism*, she argues that "[w]omen will never know who they are until they let men be men" (CBC), criticizing the idea that women attempting to look or behave in a masculine way or engaging in traditionally male activities to appear powerful or strong is problematic. bell hooks further distinguishes patriarchy from mere male chauvinism, framing it instead as an ideological mechanism that regulates gender expectations. Some argue that this system has become more



entrenched due to reinforcement by men in positions of power and prevailing cultural norms, which keep women and other genders in peripheral roles and spaces. Writers like Shulamith Firestone, Gerda Lerner and Indian feminists Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde and Amrit Kaur critique patriarchy as an invisible construct reproduced across generations. Lerner notes that patriarchy survives modernity by evolving beyond its original male-centric framework. Whether as a system oppressing women or as one of male superiority, patriarchy has evolved into a form that is often unrecognisable and markedly different from its earlier incarnations.

Ani DiFranco, the American-Canadian musician and activist, offers a broader definition of patriarchy. She states that "patriarchy is a fundamental imbalance underlying society. And it is one we rarely address because it is so universal" (Ani DiFranco). Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek criticises gender oppression and the portrayal of female sexuality. She differs from other writers in that her works embody, as Kostova says, the norm rather than the exception, and she often depicts types representing a particular class and upbringing. She does not view patriarchy as male dominance; she states, "I do not fight against men, but against the system that is sexist" (Elfriede Interview). Therefore, Jelinek supports the idea that patriarchy does not solely refer to 'male dominance' but also to how capitalism, materialism, class, sex, and other forms of oppression combine and lead to the exploitation of people, especially women. The present paper aims to illustrate that the concept of patriarchy has undergone a long evolution, with changes in its form and function. The notion of 'male hegemony' is being examined to broaden its scope and consider 'hegemony' as a gender-neutral term.

Patriarchy as a power of control

Hegemony, as a term, refers to the dominance or supremacy of one state or social group over others. Its study in relation to gender studies and patriarchy forms the basis of the argument that concludes by describing patriarchy as a gender-neutral term. Patriarchy is no longer simply male dominance or supremacy over women. Instead, it is an ideology of maintaining control and domination by the powerful over the powerless. Ani DiFranco, in the context of Donald Trump's presidency, says, "Trump represents patriarchy run amok, patriarchy unfettered" (Ani DiFranco 1:50- 1:53). Having said that, she does not associate patriarchy with gender nor portray Trump as a woman-hater or as being related to his sexuality. She describes the situation as "an energy that leads to domination" (Ani DiFranco 1: 53- 2: 00) and notes that "we have minimal language to



examine it" (Ani DiFranco 2: 00- 2: 03). The point is not that we lack the language to examine patriarchy, but rather that the structure upon which patriarchy is built is so strong and has always been concealed, often disguised as something else—previously as the father's control, and sometimes in the study of patriarchy about class, sex, race, etc.

American political theorist Iris Marion Young and feminist economist Heidi Hartmann both argue that patriarchy and capitalism interact to oppress women. Similarly, Audre Lorde, an African-American feminist, contends that racism and patriarchy are interconnected systems of oppression. Consequently, this remains a largely unrecognised problem, or, as the first chapter of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* titles it, "the problem that has no name" (Friedan 44). Although this issue has often been examined alongside other forms of oppression, it has not been sufficiently explored on its own, especially about power and control. Jiddu Krishnamurti, in discussing how a specific idea or concept becomes tradition through its continual repetition in our minds, states, "You are a slave to words. Your mind functions with words, and you are used to a certain set of words" (Krishnamurti); this indicates that the assigned meaning of certain words creates a fixed sense, and its ongoing repetition affirms that meaning. Likewise, the definition of patriarchy is linked with male dominance, as its persistent repetition as male hegemony has reinforced and stabilised this understanding of the term. This fosters disagreements among feminists themselves, who, according to some progressive writers such as Camille Paglia, Patricia Hill Collins, Bell Hooks, and Lindsey German, diverge from mainstream feminism aimed at empowering women.

Lindsey German, a British political activist, argued for the need to redefine the origins and sources of patriarchy, describing mainstream theories as offering "little understanding of how women's oppression and the nature of the family have changed historically. Nor is there much notion of how vastly that oppression varies from class to class. (German)" Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek writes against women's oppression, identity, and sexuality. Unlike Andrea Dworkin, who criticises pornography and sees it as a tool by which men control, objectify, and subjugate women, Jelinek reverses this perspective in her writings. She often explores sexual violence and power against women, but *The Piano Teacher* is a book that challenges this narrative. In this novel, as Razia Iqbal states, "It is the woman who is ostensibly the exploiter" (Elfriede, Introduction).



The Piano Teacher: the exploiter and the exploited

In the novel, Erika is portrayed as a repressed, talented, and lonely woman living with her domineering mother. This excerpt offers a concise overview of women's political and economic representation in contemporary contexts. It is a semi-autobiographical novel based on Jelinek's personal experience of living with her authoritarian mother and pursuing a demanding musical career, which caused severe anxiety and kept her confined to her parental home. Jelinek, through this work, criticises both male and female sexuality equally, illustrating the extent of power and control exercised to subjugate and oppress women, rendering them weak and mentally unstable, with limited judgment or control over their lives. The protagonist of the novel, however, fights back against her mother, but this struggle is not to seek justice or freedom to live as she wishes; instead, it depicts Erika's frustration and disgust at her mother's domineering nature.

At the very beginning of the novel, Erika is described as a "little whirlwind" (Elfriede 3) trying to escape her mother, suggesting that she is a free-spirited person. In the opening lines of the novel, Erika's mother appears as an "inquisitor and executioner in one, recognised unanimously as Mother by the State and the Family" (Elfriede 3). This introduction of the unnamed mother character, referred to with the generic, capitalised "Mother", is symbolic here. Kostova interprets the capitalised "Mother" as a symbolic figure authorised by society, where family functions like a mini-state—the mother rules with absolute dominance, and the child becomes her subordinate (Kostova 505).

Jelinek aims to portray Austria's political reality and its deeply embedded Nazi ideology of exclusion, hatred, punishment, ethnic cleansing, and domination, which are still subconsciously supported by social institutions. The book indicates that the neo-Nazi spirit haunts the lives and minds of Vienna's residents, which Kostova describes as a land of classical music and artistic wealth.

In many of her works, Jelinek sharply criticises Austria and its tendency to portray itself as a victim, refusing to acknowledge its involvement in the Nazi Holocaust. Because of this, she is even called "Austria's *'Nestbeschmutzerin'* [befouler of her own nest]" (Kostova 504). Reflecting this ideology of dominance and authority, Jelinek depicts Erika as a character influenced by the neo-Nazi spirit of ethnic cleansing and extreme intolerance towards others. This persists in "her psychology and methods of operation of social

groups like schools and families, where children endure physical and psychological torment at their parents' hands" (Kostova 505).

The renowned publication, *The Guardian*, observes that Jelinek's "work tends to see power and aggression as the driving forces of relationships, in which men and parents subjugate women" (*The Guardian*). The nameless mother in the story acts as a total authority, exerting complete control over Erika's life. The text suggests that in Erika's world, privacy between mother and daughter does not exist—the child is expected to have no private space or secrets. (Elfriede 5) has left a lasting impression on the child's mind, one that Erika, even in her late thirties, cannot shake off. She is unable to live without her mother, nor can she fully detach herself from her mother's care. The mother even prohibits her from wearing clothes of her choice; she insists that Erika deserves consequences for indulging in what she considers unimportant, implying that even affection must be disciplined and controlled (Elfriede 7).

Erika's mother shows little concern for her daughter, offering little support when she inquires about her whereabouts or when she asks to be relieved of household chores; all she aims to do is pressure her daughter to become skilled in her chosen profession. "Mother chose a career for Erika when her daughter was still young ..." (Elfriede 24). Erika's profession was not something she selected for herself; it was her mother who constructed her future long before Erika could resist, emphasising artistic perfection only because it could yield financial gain. The mother is not the ideal parent here; she is a materialist who prioritises money over her child's desires and happiness, believing that "Money never goes out of fashion" (Elfriede 4). Although Erika is economically independent, she cannot make her own choices, so the theories aimed at liberating and empowering women through economic independence do not apply here. Even though Erika earns, it is the mother who makes decisions—the one who contributes less financially holds complete authority, while the daughter merely funds her wishes (Elfriede 5).

The mother treats Erika as an object she can possess and is always anxious to keep her "property" immobile; that is why she even prevents her from marrying, even at the age of forty, to satisfy her materialistic needs. The mother controls everything, "Mother ignores her pleas, for she alone dictates the shalts and shalt-nots" (Elfriede 6). Erika rebels, "You bitch, you bitch!" Erika yells furiously at the authority. ... Erika pulls at her hair, which she herself has beautified. She yanks it furiously" (Elfriede 8). Later, the child is seen crying,



upset and weeping, “After all, her mama works her fingers to the bone for her” (Elfriede 8). The fixed identity of a mother in the child's mind is so deeply rooted that the child cannot change it. "As a rule, Erika instantly regrets anything she does to her, for she loves her; Mama has known her since infancy" (Elfriede 8). Jelinek's depiction of the catastrophic attachment between Erika Kohut and her mother is central to the portrayal of sexual disturbance in this book. Not only does the mother dominate her child, but she also controls Erika's behaviour and thoughts because society or the state has conferred on the mother the authority to dictate rules for her child: "It is a mother's duty to help a child make up her mind and to prevent wrong decisions" (Elfriede 9).

As a result, day by day, Erika becomes someone who thinks highly of herself and despises anyone she considers inferior or lacking artistic knowledge and experience. Later, she is seen venting her anger on these people, whom she regards as ignorant of great art and aimlessly wandering. On her way home, Erika's bitterness erupts physically—she pushes into fellow passengers, slashing space with her instruments as if reclaiming a power long denied to her (Elfriede 15). She has become a mentally unstable individual who finds pleasure in hurting others, “SHE endures such agonies..., focusing her mind, wielding her bow, and laughing at pupils who played worse than she. She wants to teach people how to be afraid, how to shudder” (Elfriede 19). The hatred Erika harbours is depicted as a form of masochism, where she derives pleasure from harming others; the trolley scene illustrates this best, where she, the seemingly innocent artist, harms others through her musical instruments, “What upsets HER most of all is the way people dwell in one another, the way they shamelessly take possession of one another. Each pushes his way into other minds, into their innermost attention” (Elfriede 21). This scene hints at the latent Nazi ideology of inflicting pain and segregation, with Erika portrayed as "the artist," and others as the commoners or fools who fail to appreciate high art.

Another example of this latent ideology becomes clear when Erika acts as a gatekeeper for her students' musical careers. She is not the ideal teacher striving for her students' success but rather an "executioner" who "permanently damages their chances in the profession" (Kostova 507). In both scenes, Erika, who was previously victimised by her mother's domination and control, turns into the oppressor, causing harm to others. Therefore, the line between the “victim and the victimiser is completely blurred here” (Kostova 507), because Erika's aggressive behaviour arises from the trauma and control inflicted by her mother, who is both



a victim and an oppressor. Similarly, the commuters she injures on her way home are both victims and oppressors of Erika. Jelinek highlights the “rhetoric shared by both parties” (Kostova 507) and “the rhetoric of hatred and exclusion” (Kostova 507). Walter Klemmer, a student, enters Erika's life. Until then, no man had been part of her life; her father had already left, and later, her mother never allowed anyone to come close to her to prevent spoiling Erika. With Walter's introduction, a male critique of patriarchy emerges as he pursues his teacher, Erika, and admires her for her artistic intelligence. Walter is young, studying engineering, but has developed an interest in music and piano playing, attending concerts regularly. Walter's attempts to please his teacher—a mature, middle-aged woman—reflect an idea or tendency to exploit women as playthings, utilising their energy while offering nothing in return. This idea is illustrated through the description of how and why Walter pursues his teacher.

Walter's fascination begins innocently with her musical precision—the way Erika moves, thinks and produces sound—but admiration gradually becomes desire, and desire turns into an urge to use her as a sexual and emotional experiment (Elfriede 63).

Initially, it seems he is impressed by Erika's "music intelligence." However, it later becomes clear that "Klemmer has a second goal, along with music, and he now thinks it through. ... He wants to confront her with his animal instincts... (Elfriede 63-64). Walter submits initially—obeying her instructions, learning from her experience—not to love her, but to refine himself for future conquest, treating Erika like a trial ground rather than a partner. This description shows how men often view women as objects they can exploit for their own benefit. Walter treats Erika as something he can use, like an object or an asset to be exploited and discarded. "He will teach her how to love, or at least accept, the body she has always denied. He will cautiously teach her everything she needs to know about love, but then he will turn to more rewarding goals and more challenging tasks regarding the female enigma. The eternal enigma. (Elfriede 65). Ironically, once he learns enough, he plans to reverse roles—to teach her instead—only to abandon her later for someone youthful, making Erika a temporary step in his self-development.

It suggests that Walter is pursuing her to exploit her, using her as a test whose failure will cost him nothing. The relationship between Erika and Walter is not based on love or attraction. Instead, their relationship exposes the power dynamics that result in one partner subjugating the other. When Erika shares her sexual



desires with Walter to hurt and enslave herself, Walter's initial reaction is, "What does she think, who she is" (Elfriede 217). He could not tolerate the idea of being ordered around or controlled by a woman, especially under her conditions. He was enraged and raped Erika in her own home. The scene of assault demonstrates that the ideology of viewing women as inferiors, as enslaved beings, and as objects is so deeply rooted in the human psyche that women are seen both as victims and as victimisers.

Conclusion

Erika, a piano teacher, is often suppressed by her mother, who restricts her career options, forbids her from wearing the clothes she chooses, and prevents her from talking to men, among other things. This makes her feel like a victim of her mother's dominance and control. Later, she becomes a character who mistreats her students and the people she meets on her journey home, simply because she believes they do not understand art. Here, she becomes a victimiser, hurting others. Again, with her encounter with Walter, she tries to dominate him by revealing her sexual desires and perverted fantasies of treating her as an enslaved person and raping her. However, the ending of the play shows that Erika, as an individual, ends up being a victim, raped by Walter. Through Erika's exploitation at the hands of both her mother and Walter Klemmer, Jelinek critiques male and female roles within the text, ultimately leading to Erika's exploitation. Therefore, patriarchy is not merely a gender-biased term; it is a hegemonic concept related to power and dominance.

The concept of hegemony today has taken on a new form, one that is directly connected to power and dominance in general, regardless of gender. The text by Elfriede Jelinek justifies the gender neutrality of this term, where gender does not play a significant role in the subjugation and exploitation of women; rather, it is the extent of power that someone holds socially that enables them to treat others in a way they deem acceptable. The Piano Teacher is one of the finest books in which the author presents both male and female critics responsible for the subjugation of women in society. It provides appropriate examples that show that a woman can be both a victim and a perpetrator simultaneously, as demonstrated by the character of Erika.

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