

Navigating Societal Norms and Patriarchal Structures in *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid

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Abstract

This research aims to explore the effects of societal norms and patriarchal structures on women in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017), through a close examination of female characters. The study intends to examine the portrayal of women, their agency, and the societal constraints in a male-dominated society. The researcher explores and analyzes the study through the theoretical framework of feminist theory (1898) given by Gilman. The significance of the study is to unveil the dominance of strict societal norms and patriarchal structures on women in *Exit West* (2017). The findings of this research study explores that women characters in *Exit West* (2017) are forced to follow the customs, norms, and traditions fixed by the stern patriarchal society. These social limitations throughout the novel restrict her right of individuality and independence in the society. The conclusion of this research explores the ways in which these strict male-centered society exploits women's rights and freedom. These social norms and male-dominant structures undermine women's individual liberty including emotional, physical, and sexual lives.

Keywords: Feminist Theory, Patriarchy, Societal Norms, Women's Autonomy, Gender Roles, Cultural Expectations, Male-Dominated Society

Introduction

The basic objective of the present research is to find and explore the effects of societal norms and patriarchal structures on women in *Exit West* (2017) through the theory of feminism (1898) given by Gilman. Gilman (1898) was one of the key figures in the development of First-Wave Feminism in the late 19th century and early 20th centuries. Gilman (1899) had strong views about gendered expectations in matters of marriage, family, and society. Gilman wrote her poem titled *In Duty Bound*, which reflected her rebellious elements against the societal demands placed on dutiful housewives. She has greatly influenced the generations of feminist thinkers and scholars. Gilman in her theory of feminism (1898) addresses the issues of suffrage, patriarchal structures, and social norms. The application of Gilman's feminist theory (1898) as lens helps in exploring the effects of social norms and patriarchal structures on women in the text of Hamid's *Exit West* (2017). Gilman sadly contended that women are the most suppressed half of humanity. She urged that the necessary improvement was compulsory to save the exploitation of this human race. Gilman (1898) strongly believed that economic independence for women was the only thing that could make them equal to men and bring them freedom. Feminist theory (1898) is given by Gilman advocated for women and their rights by promoting and encouraging equality. She has greatly contributed

towards achieving social change just like in Hamid's *Exit West* (2017), where women characters are striving to achieve their social position and status in a strict patriarchal society.

Literature Review

The relationship between women and patriarchal structures has been a central focus in feminist literary criticism. In this research, Gilman's feminist theory (1898) provides the primary theoretical framework. According to Gilman, patriarchy operates by limiting women to roles that confine them to domestic and maternal duties, undermining their individuality and freedom. This theory emphasizes the importance of economic independence for women and critiques the societal structures that perpetuate gender inequality. According to Millett (1970), feminism has also brought people attention to the power dynamics that impact women who are abused physically, sexually, or emotionally. She also advocated for civic rights, anti-psychiatry, and human rights in addition to feminism. Additionally, she became part of a number of feminist activities, including the pressure group. Organizations use various techniques for the achievement of the goals of the feminist movement, this pairing is a bit rare. The second strategy offers a very extremist and conservative perspective, the first on mentioned is situated inside the liberal feminist theory. According to Kate Millett, the universal and durability of patriarchy make its greatest psychological power and weapon. Millett wholeheartedly praised that patriarchy may reorganize itself from generation to generation and time to time. The feminist struggle has brought down difficulties that women face with each new wave and era, in order to discover that others still remain. The practice misogyny and vivid gender discrimination may not be as widespread as they formerly were in the past years. They remain negatively impact women's lives in the current world. According to Walby (1990), the term patriarchy refers to a set of societal institutions and behaviors that men use to control, subjugate, and take advantage of women. Walby affirms that patriarchy functions in a more complex way through six different structures rather than related to the aggressive theory that there is only one widespread type of patriarchy: 1) Domestic production dynamics, A husband expects his wife to work for him without a any payment at home. 2) Paid employment: In the workplace, women face unequal treatment, discriminatory compensation, and frequently less demanding positions than men. The state can be basically oppressive to women due to patriarchal laws and policies. 3) Fundamental prejudice exists in society against men. 4) Male aggression opposite to appearances, this is neither isolated or random but rather it functions according to a organized and preplanned criteria. States that just negates violence between men and women unintentionally contribute to its everlasting nature by their lack of intervention. 5) Patriarchal relations in sexuality: Both genders are subject to different social values and structures when it comes to sexual behavior. 6) Patriarchal cultural institutions: The media, religion, and education are various of the channels through which women are depicted in society. The continue this practice repeatedly in the society. The way femininity of the women perceived is then influenced by these points of view. The current research uses the lens of feminism theory (1898) given by Charlotte Gilman as theoretical framework to analyze the text. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Gilman played a significant role in the development of First-Wave Feminism. According to Gilman (1898), women should not rely financially on males to live independently. In order to achieve economic equality for women, she argued for the acknowledgment and backing of women who work outside the home as well as the recognition and professionalism of domestic work. She has made a significant impact on feminist scholars and intellectuals for several decades. Charlotte Gilman's feminist philosophy addresses the issues of suffrage, patriarchal structures, and social norms and their effects on women in the society. She also analyzed the economic aspects and

implications of gender inequality. A prolific novelist, philosopher, and activist, Gilman dissected the oppression of women through the lens of her own experiences.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design to analyze the effects of societal norms and patriarchal structures on women in *Exit West* (2017). The theoretical framework is based on Gilman's feminist theory (1898), which is applied to a close reading of the novel. Primary data is drawn from the text itself, focusing on key characters, their interactions, and the gender dynamics that emerge within the narrative. Secondary sources, such as academic articles and journals, provide additional context and support the analysis. The close reading methodology, as outlined by Greenham (2018), is used to carefully examine the language, themes, and characters in the text. This method involves several stages: initial reading, annotation, analysis, interpretation, and synthesis, all of which allow the researcher to understand the nuanced ways in which patriarchal values manifest in the text.

Data Analysis

The paper explores and analyzes how societal standards and patriarchal structures influence women in *Exit West* (2017) which is written by Mohsin Hamid. The discussion is mainly centered on two primary research objectives: The research discussion begins with how societal standards impact the women within the novel, and secondly to explore the effects of patriarchal structures on female within the modern society portrayed in the book. The researcher utilizes Gilman's feminist theory (1898) as lens to look at these ideas and thoughts. Gilman's theory studies the way society holds women back, constraining their flexibility and freedom. The utilization of her feminist thoughts depict how the characters within the book, particularly women, are influenced by these cultural and societal desires.

Extract 1

"They tormented each other in this way, since travel between dusk and dawn was forbidden, and so they could not be alone without Saeed spending the entire night, which seemed to her a step well worth taking, but to him something they should delay, in part, he said, because he did not know what to tell his parents and in part because he feared leaving them alone" (Hamid, 2017, p.26).

This passage highlights how societal standards limit women's freedom and independence. Saeed's hesitation to spend the night with Nadia due to societal norms reflects the patriarchal structures that enforce moral standards on relationships, particularly regarding women's actions. Nadia's desire for freedom contrasts with Saeed's need to conform to social rules, showcasing the societal pressures that restrict women's autonomy. This aligns with Gilman's feminist theory (1898), which critiques the patriarchal control that limits women's independence.

Extract 2

"Saeed was certain he was in love. Nadia was not certain what exactly she was feeling, but she was certain it had force" (Hamid, 2017, p. 25).

This exchange reflects the conflict between societal expectations and individual desires. Saeed, influenced by traditional societal norms, feels compelled to express his emotions in a certain way, while Nadia's complex feelings of love highlight her struggle for autonomy and independence. This internal conflict mirrors Gilman's feminist theory, which discusses how women's emotional autonomy is constrained by societal pressures. Nadia's uncertainty about her feelings, influenced

by these external expectations, demonstrates the broader societal constraints on women's self-expression.

Extract 3

"Nadia was herself coming to acknowledge that this was no longer a city where the risks facing a young woman living independently could be thought of as manageable... but part of her still resisted the idea of moving in with him, with anyone for that matter, having at such great difficulty moved out in the first place" (Hamid, 2017, p.36).

This passage emphasizes Nadia's internal struggle between personal freedom and societal expectations. Her resistance to moving in with Saeed reflects her fear of losing independence in a patriarchal society that restricts women's autonomy. Gilman's feminist theory (1898) would argue that women must assert their independence, and Nadia's reluctance to conform to patriarchal expectations reflects her desire for autonomy. The social judgment women face for living independently is a direct challenge to their freedom and agency.

Extract 4

"...finding the idea of living as a chaste half lover, half sister to Saeed in close proximity to his parents rather bizarre..." (Hamid, 2017, p. 36).

This passage highlights the societal expectations placed on women's chastity and moral behavior, particularly in the context of relationships. Nadia's discomfort with Saeed's offer to live with him reflects the societal pressure on women to conform to strict codes of behavior and respectability, which Gilman's feminist theory critiques. Gilman would argue that these societal norms limit women's autonomy by forcing them to adhere to patriarchal values that prioritize control over women's personal lives and relationships.

Findings

The findings of this research study explores that the protagonist of Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) Nadia is forced to follow the set rules and regulations by the stern patriarchal society. The character of Nadia remains reluctant to express her feelings, desires and to take decisions according to her own will and choice. The societal norms repeatedly restricts her right of individuality and independence in the society. She is unable to travel, act and love independently in a contemporary society which is controlled by male members. The protagonist Nadia also depicts the rebellious nature of women betraying and straying the patriarchal traditions and social limitations.

For example the female character Nadia in *Exit West* (2017) refuses Saeed's investigation about her religious practices, beliefs and her faith. This shows her intervention towards the strict conventions and customs of the society imposed upon women. Furthermore the findings of this research examines the stiff effects of the patriarchal structures on the relationship between male and female as depicted in the novel *Exit West* (2017) . Nadia's relationship with Saeed in *Exit West* (2017) is defined and projected by the norms, expectations and structures of the patriarchal society. The male character Saeed refuses to accept Nadia being alone with him before marriage due to the social constraints while on the other hand Nadia is searching for her liberty and independence in opposing these customs.

The research findings also finds that the character of Nadia resists the social and patriarchal limitations that keep women to their domestic role and activities. Nadia in *Exit West* (2017) is not accepting the nature of dependency on men in the society. The novel shows that even in the situation of war and migration, Nadia rejects to withdraw her self-power and autonomy. Thus she reflects that how women are subjugated, suppressed and controlled by the social standards and

laws. The internal struggle and emotional experience of Nadia about love, relationship and affiliation depicts the broader impact of societal conventions and male dominated social structures of the society.

The research findings shows the force and pressure faced by women due to circumstances in contemporary patriarchal society depicted in Hamid's *Exit West* (2017). These forces limit women to freely express their feelings and emotions according to their desires and personal needs. Gilman's feminist theory (1898) reflects how women are suppressed emotionally, intellectually and physically in a male centered society. The research study further finds that female are vulnerable and weak in a male dominant society. Mohsin Hamid depicts Nadia as representative figure of women being controlled and forced by the social system shaped by men.

The patriarchal societies consider women as weak, passive and always dependent on men for their needs and desires as shown in *Exit West* (2017) through the character of protagonist Nadia. Saeed as a male character has beliefs and thoughts that are rooted in patriarchal structures. Gilman's feminist theory (1898) explores these harmful impacts of male centered attitude towards women which restrict women to their households. The findings of this research also explores that patriarchy and social norms of the society not only effect women but also the perception and understanding of men as well. The male character Saeed in *Exit West* (2017) is represented by Mohsin Hamid who believes that women gender must be protected and cared by men. This shows the conventional role men plays in a patriarchal society. According to Gilman (1898), this belief of men restricts women independence, freedom and autonomy.

Conclusions

The application of Gilman's feminist theory (1898) on the novel *Exit West* (2017) by Mohsin Hamid gives a thorough analysis of the patriarchal structures and societal norms that restrict women self determination, desires, freedom and emotional liberty. This research study examines and analyzes the key extracts from the text to provide the elaborated discussion relevant to the aim of this study. This shows the protagonist Nadia as suppressed and subdued by the constraints and laws of the patriarchal society. Gilman's feminist ideas and views on the social limitations and patriarchal domination on women echoes strongly in *Exit West* (2017). This limit women to their domestic role as mothers, wives and sisters. These social norms and male dominant structures undermine women's individual liberty including emotional, physical and sexual lives.

The analysis of Nadia and Saeed relationship shows the vivid unrest between the desires, choices and conventional role in the society. Nadia's revolt against social norms, customs and traditions reflect her rebellious and resisting nature. She is unable to accept the strict laws and expectations of the patriarchal society imposed upon women. Hamid in *Exit West* (2017) also depicts Nadia's internal and emotional struggle while communicating with the male character Saeed. In broader sense the portrayal of Nadia in the novel represents the real picture of women in a patriarchal society who are striving for their survival and peace. Furthermore, the societal expectations and attributes deeply influence the mind of the male character Saeed in *Exit West* (2017).

The patriarchal structures raises the internal conflicts in the minds of men while dealing with women in different relationships within the stern society. This shows that social norms not only effect women but they also influence men's emotions, feelings intellect and self realization. In light of Gilman's feminist theory (1898), this research study delves to discuss the limitations, restrictions and subjugation of women by the strict social norms and patriarchal structures. It explores the ways in which these stern male centered society exploits women's rights and freedoms. Gilman criticizes the constraints imposed upon women by patriarchal structures in the society. The indeep analysis of the novel *Exit West* (2017) by Mohsin Hamid through the theoretical framework of

Gilman's feminist theory (1898) poses the valuable insights about the effects of patriarchal social structures, norms and traditions on women and their resistance to these customs.

Recommendations

This research study recommends that future researcher may apply Gilman's feminist theory to other literary works that depict the effects of societal norms and patriarchal structures on women. The indepth comparison of Gilman feminist ideas about women and their role in a male dominant societies with other novels could give valuable insights to enhance the understanding of the readers. The research could further explore the process of change, growth and activity between men and women in a male dominant social structures. It allows other researchers to analyze how these societal principles and patriarchal framework not only bound women role but also mould the actions, desires and intellect of male members of the society as depicted in *Exit West* (2017) by Mohsin Hamid.

Furthermore, the research may examine the comparison between various cultures in relation to social laws, customs and their effects on women. This could explore the universal themes of women subordination, oppression and resistance towards the stern social customs and traditions. This research study further suggests the future researchers and writers to prolong the concentration on women characters in literary texts who are resisting the social order of the society. This would help to inspire and empower the women lives in real world.

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