

## Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" and Isaac Babel's "My First Goose" as Critiques of Patriarchy: A Comparative Reading

Dr. Ameen Z. M. alKhamaiseh

Prof. Assistant at Ajloun National University

**Abstract:** This paper presents a critique of patriarchy in Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" (1948) and Isaac Babel's "My First Goose" (1929). The main argument centers on the question of whether patriarchy can be challenged or resisted in a male-chauvinist society. Through a comparative reading of the two stories in question, the study seeks to unravel the main factors supporting patriarchy. In Jackson's story, patriarchy is supported by the villagers' thoughtless following of traditions. This factor contributes much to the marginalization of woman and naturalizing them as meager and weak creatures. Therefore, Jackson's critique of patriarchy figures mainly in critiquing the traditional role women are satisfied to play in their society. In other words, she blames women for accepting themselves to be subordinate and second to men. However, in Babel's story, patriarchy supports itself by creating stereotypical images about men and women. These stereotypes contribute further to the general notion that man occupies the center and woman the margin.

**Key Words:** Patriarchy, Traditions, Challenge.

### Introduction

Many writers introduce their writings about the subject of patriarchy by presenting a brief summary about this historical relationship between man and woman and the situation of both in their society. They seek to naturalize the way man and woman are seen and treated accordingly. However, Jackson's "The Lottery" (1948) and Babel's "My First Goose" (1926) deviate from the normal order by which many writers fall into the trap of gender bias. There is no sign, implying any form of bias practiced in the two stories.

"The Lottery," for example, revolves around a group of villagers performing an annual ritual. They gather once every year to elect someone through a lottery to be stoned to death. Although this activity seems to be absurd and time-wasting, yet there is something mysterious lurking behind it. There is no single person in the village, seeking to stop it even though every one there knows that this activity leads towards destruction and that many lives are lost by it. Here, Jackson critiques not only the way the villagers observe traditions as many critics have thought but also the social injustices prompted by their blind following of traditions. In other words, Jackson tries to penetrate the darkness lurking behind such thoughtless following of traditions. She advances the thesis that there is a certain ideology that the villagers seek to maintain. This ideology aims at normalizing the situation of man and woman in society under the pretext of following traditions.

On the other hand, Babel's story presents a group of Russian soldiers who devour an old woman and kill her unique goose to eat it. Although the story does not hint at any form of gender bias, yet the writer succeeds in dramatizing how patriarchy can be practiced in a state of war. The goose symbolizes a female character who is unable to resist the authority of man, especially given the fact that the story takes place in the time of war.

## Literature Review

The body of research conducted on patriarchy and its influence on society is either incomplete or specific gender-biased. Most of the articles and books written on patriarchy tackle this issue from a specific male or female perspective which are in most cases subjective or male or female-oriented. Perhaps, there are few sources that present the subject of patriarchy rather objectively and free of any form of gender bias. On the other hand, the subject of patriarchy has long been tackled from a narrow and limited corner: mostly from a feminist perspective alone. However, this paper connects patriarchy with other societal forms such as capitalism and with social and economical ideologies. In his seminar paper "Blind Adherence to Traditions in 'The Lottery' by Shirley Jackson," Ahmet Yildirim rightly argues that Jackson's story presents an example of violence practiced in the form of a thoughtless following of traditions. Here, Yildirim presents this blind following of traditions as something to be questioned not because he believes that traditions here are used to maintain certain patriarchal ideologies but because he sees tradition as something to be updated from time to time(2014,3). His use of the word "outdated" in describing the villagers' following of traditions reflects something he overlooks in his paper about patriarchy. However, this paper seeks to point out the missing notion overlooked in Yildirim's paper. The present paper attempts to highlight that traditions in a patriarchal society as in the case of Jackson's story need no update because they are meant to maintain man's control over woman and to keep certain ideologies in action. In other words, the current paper creates a strong connection between traditions and ideologies. For this reason, the present writer believes that the villagers who are mostly men adhere to this blind and thoughtless following of traditions.

In "The Elements of Paganism as Reflected in Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery,'" Essy Syam and Raja Syamsidar present the society of the villagers in Jackson's story as a pagan tribe that believes in superstitions. What is curious about this article is the fact that it presents the female in connection with the ancient myth of a female being sacrificed to save the tribe from the wrath of a monster emerging from time to time. "Even though the tradition is scary," Syam and Syamsidar claim, "but the villagers keep applying it because they believe the ritual can save them" (2018, 1). However, although Syam and Syamsidar succeed in their presentation of the characters of Jackson's story, yet their presentation of patriarchy seems to be mainly male-biased because they have not cast any blame to the villagers carrying out the sacrifice. Instead, they depict this tradition as an attempt to save the society, exactly like the ancient myth about a lurking monster waiting for a beautiful girl to be sacrificed to save her people from him.

On the other hand, there is the element of a female sacrifice in Babel's story, but this time, it is presented symbolically rather than directly as is the case in Jackson's story. In *Men without Women: Masculinity and Revolution in Russian Fiction, 1917-1929*, Eliot Borenstein claims that

the slaying of the goose by Lyutov in Babel's story "implies a capacity for murder" that is primarily male-chauvinistic (2000, 92). This book presents patriarchy within a specific context of the Russian revolution that spans between the period 1917-1929. Although this book gives us a clear image about the situation of woman during the time of the Russian revolution, yet there is something subjective rather than objective about the treatment of women in Babel's story. Again, the bulk of research conducted on the subject of patriarchy is mainly limited and narrowed by specific gender angle, which creates a gap between subjectivity and objectivity. This is a trap many researchers have fallen into.

## **Research Methodology**

The methodology followed in this paper is mainly theoretical and analytical. The aim of this paper is to show the way patriarchy treats woman in Jackson's and Babel's stories. The researcher follows a theoretical and text-based analytical approach to give a clear-cut definition of patriarchy within the context of the two stories in question. Also, there is the comparative approach followed throughout the entire paper, which aims at illuminating the various elements supporting patriarchy. The researcher brings two stories from different contexts and compares them in terms of their treatment of patriarchy to show that there are different forms in which patriarchy can be exercised.

## **Discussion**

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Jackson's "The Lottery" and Babel's "My First Goose" is how women are presented and the way they are treated accordingly. While "The Lottery" examines a female's resistance of patriarchy from a Capitalistic perspective, "My First Goose" shows how inferior women are in comparison to men. It seems that violence and male-dominance are the major reasons for women to be treated that way. These elements create a male-chauvinist society in which women are objectified and maltreated. This paper aims at discussing "The Lottery" and "My First Goose" in terms of their presentation of women and exploring the forms of oppression they seem to suffer from. It is interesting, therefore, to approach these texts from a feminist perspective, as a way to show how this literature critiques the different patriarchal views of women.

In *What is Feminism: an Introduction to Feminist Theory*(1999), Chris Beasley sums up the main reasons behind such maltreatment of women. She convincingly writes, "feminists have argued that this is simply a part of three on-going processes: excluding, marginalizing and trivializing women and their accounts of social and political life" (4). A careful examination of the texts under discussion shows that men have occupied the center and women the margin. In other words, there is no significant role that women can play in these texts. In "The Lottery," women play very traditional roles as housekeepers and children guardians. They do not actually participate in mainstream scenes. They are powerless and submissive and they are subordinate to their husbands. Jackson, therefore, presents a clear-cut male-biased society by "excluding" women and "marginalizing" them. It has become evident that this way of treating women has its own purposes as it speaks to the politics of patriarchy.

In order to understand how "The Lottery" unfolds the situation that women have, one needs to revisit the scene in which the villagers gather to witness the incident. First, Jackson presents children as the first comers to the lottery. Here, she tries to show the absurdity that the lottery has. On the other hand, she gives the children some significance for making the piles of stones. The arrival of the children to the place in which the lottery takes place is followed by the men who "[begin] to gather, surveying their own children, speaking of planting and rain, tractors and taxes" (Mitchell, Chase, Trussler, 1999, 226). It is only after the men and the children that women are allowed to come to the lottery. This relegation seems to be male-biased because it seeks to marginalize women and dominate them.

In a similar fashion, "My First Goose" presents an old woman as an excluded, marginalized character. Although she seems to have a land of her own, it does not make her a powerful woman. Therefore, she is unable even to protect her own land from Lyutov who has attacked her and killed her goose. In addition, he asks her to serve him food and cook the only goose she has for dinner. This shows how inferior she is as a woman in comparison to Lyutov who is only a soldier among the Cossacks. Again, this notion speaks to the politics of patriarchy and poses an important question as to how does the story unravel the position of women within the context of the Russian society?

In fact, "My First Goose" is all about violence and Babel presents his characters as having to be tough and violent. For this reason he creates all the elements necessary to serve this purpose. He introduces an educated man and places him among people who are full of violence and who do not know what it means to have mercy. In order for Lyutov to be admitted into the army and be accepted by the Cossacks, however, he has to have recourse to masculinity and the use of power.

Babel depicts a clear image about the Russian society, which appears to be a male-dominant one. Right from his childhood, he was well-informed about the cruelty of the Cossacks, which informs the main themes of his story. On the other hand, women were not involved in this brutality. According to Borenstein, "female characters found in the Soviet literature of the 1920s are much more notable for their absence than presence" (Kaganovsky, 2008, 73).

In "The Lottery," however, the relationship between men and women illustrates some aspects of patriarchal society. Jackson demonstrates the kind of relationship that seems to govern men and women in the village. They are governed by a husband-wife relationship. This relationship is a major product of patriarchy because the male figures in this relationship are the ones to sponsor their families and exercise the sorts of activities to be executed. In contrast, the female figures have to be submissive and obedient.

In other words, Jackson describes women as financially and socially dependent on their husbands. This becomes evident when she presents women as "standing by their husbands" (Mitchell, Chase and Trussler, 1999, 226). Later on, she illustrates this further as she strips women of any particular significance. It is interesting, for example, how the lists of families are

made up. Each family has a male head of its own to represent it. This male member is the one to draw a paper from the ballot box for his family during the lottery incident.

Many feminist writers try to subvert this social order in which the wife is put as second to her husband. They suggest that women should stop to continue looking at themselves as inferior and they should cease seeing themselves as mere objects. In "The Feminist Analysis of Shirley Jackson's The Lottery," the writers contend that women's acceptance of their position as inferior is the most noticeable aspect of the whole issue. They rightly assume:

Although these kinds of thoughts have been imposed on women since a long time ago, women themselves also accept them. In fact, they accept that they should always be dependent on the opposite gender and obey them, so they can never be autonomous creatures. In a way they work behind the scene in a patriarchy. They stay in the realm of inferiority, as though it is truly their place in society. (Hosseini Maasoum, 2012, 34)

By accepting their inferiority and never showing any attempt to resist, women are supporting patriarchy and maintaining its authority.

Women are stereotyped as weak and fragile creatures. They have become "a kind of rag-bag of repressed elements that cannot be allowed within the masculine" (Beasley, 1999, 7). The effects that are created by the process of stereotyping women contribute a great deal to marginalizing them and excluding them from the masculine world. In other words, stereotyping serves two purposes. One is that it prevents women from having access to power and therefore keeps them vulnerable and subordinate to men. The other is that it allows men free use of their bodies and what they have.

The idea that women are weaker than men makes the old woman in "My First Goose" easy prey for Lyutov and his comrades. He attacks her and kills her goose. The words used here to describe the scene which include "attack," "prey," and "kill" give a clear image about the scene and dramatize the present writer's attitude towards patriarchy. The scene, however, presents characteristics, describing the old woman as a weak animal or an innocent bird and presenting Lyutov and his comrades in such a way that shows a wild animal devouring and attacking a weak one. In other words, the relationship between Lyutov and the old woman is governed by the same law that governs life among the animals. It is about the same time that patriarchy comes to exercise its authority on women.

It seems as though Babel tries to compare man-woman relationship in a patriarchal society to that between two animals; one devouring the other. This is perhaps the reason why he writes the story in the wake of the Russian revolutions that transformed people into mere animals and beasts. The old woman, on the other hand, appears to be a victim of these revolutions on the one hand and a victim of patriarchy on the other.

In other words, Babel presents the patriarchal and the military as supporting and complimenting one another. As the story unfolds itself, this idea becomes more evident. Lyutov, for example, begins by describing Savitsky in terms most commensurate with a lady

describing a man she admires. He relates, "Savitsky, commander of the VI Division, rose when he saw me, and I wondered at the beauty of his giant's body" (Morison, 1957, 64). He learns that in order for him to be hailed by the Cossacks as one of them, he has to show some patriarchal evidence. Therefore, he violently accosts an old woman and kills her goose.

This action gives him acceptance by the Cossacks who welcome him as one of them. The connection that exists between the patriarchal and the military results in a general repression of women, or to use Steven G. Kellman's words, the story "links violence to a bird to denial of dignity to a marginalized human being" (Carr,2000, 106).

Similarly, Tessie Hutchinson in "The Lottery" is being victimized by two major powers. One is by patriarchy; the other is by capitalism. It must be noted that these forces complete each other in almost the same way that the military compliments patriarchy in Babel's story. To resist these forces together or one of them will put one's own life at risk. Tessie, however, is not the only female character who is being marginalized. Without exception, all the women in the village are marginalized by society on the one hand and by their husbands on the other hand. What makes Tessie easy prey before the capitalistic and the patriarchal powers is her unconscious rejection of some of the symbols that these powers represent. In order to understand Tessie's position, it is necessary to examine the village according to the criteria that govern life in the village. Financially, the village is governed by those who own the village's biggest business and the remainders of the villagers are working-class citizens. Socially, the village is established on a domestic system that governs all the families in the village. Each family is governed by the husband. Tessie is controlled by her husband and, given the fact that she is a wife; she cannot establish an autonomous financial security on her own. She is also controlled by her society because, as a woman, she cannot provide for the general economy of the village and therefore she has to surrender to the authority of both the husband and society.

The fact that the village's general economy relies heavily on men leaves the village in a state of complete failure. It prevents the village from any kind of progress. To understand this point, it is important to reconsider the traditional role that women have in the village. As Beasley has pointed out, "women come to represent physical reproduction and the nurturing of dependent children within industrial law, even though men in the workforce have children too" (1999, 7).

There are many examples in "The Lottery," showing the sorts of business women are involved in. Jackson writes, "soon the women, standing by their husbands, begin to call to their children, and the children came reluctantly, having to be called four or five times" (Mitchell, Chase and Trussler, 1999, 226). Here, Jackson presents women as "nurturing" or having to look after their children. Another example is evident in the way women are dressed. They are "wearing faded house dresses and sweaters" (ibid). Moreover, women have no voice, or in other words, their voice is unheard and silenced, as when Tessie protests against the fact that the lottery is unfair. All these examples show the village in a backward situation. Considering this idea in comparison with the neighboring villages, one concludes that the lottery is used along with many other things to keep the village way backward and ignorant. It is clear,



therefore, to have Old Man Warner say while discussing the very ideology that lurks behind the lottery that "next thing you know, they'll be wanting to go back to living in caves, nobody work anymore, live that way for a while" (ibid, 229). The lottery, then, represents an ideology used to maintain the idea of women as having to be submissive and subordinate, which prevents the entire village to develop itself and become more civilized.

The major question that informs the central argument of this paper is how is patriarchy being resisted or challenged in the stories in question? In fact, these stories present patriarchy as powerful and strong till the end. There is no sign in the stories that shows patriarchy as declining or fading away. It is as powerful as the structure of its society. In "My First Goose," for example, patriarchy derives its strength from the army or the military force that makes up the basic structure of its society. In "The Lottery," patriarchy gains its power from capitalism. It must be noted, however, that patriarchy is not a product of either force, but it is a product of some ideological beliefs that distinguish men and women and make the latter inferior to the former as a matter of fact.

In Babel's story, the old woman does not resist the authority that Lyutov exercises on her. She asks him for compassion, as when she says, "Comrade, what with all this going on, I want to go and hang myself" (Morison, 1957, 66). In other words, she cannot voice her agony, and therefore, decides to keep silent and follow the orders of her master.

This form of narrative is typical of Babel's style of writing. He presents characters who prefer to be silent in such a way that allows the reader to deduce the great sufferings that lurk behind. According to Kellman, "Babel, who, at the Soviet Writers' Congress of 1934, called himself 'the master of the genre of silence,' rarely offers blatant commentary within what he called his 'miniatures,' vivid but elliptical accounts of intense experience" (Carr, 2000, 105). This style of writing proves successful because it allows the reader to get involved in the act of judging what is going on. In this case, it is not the old woman that critiques patriarchy, but rather it is the reader who sees things from the perspective of the characters that can question the very authority of patriarchy and challenge its existence.

In "The Lottery," however, Tessie could only voice her anger as she protests, "it is unfair" (Mitchell, Chase and Trussler, 1999, 232). She appears more courageous and active than does the old woman in Babel's story. Although Tessie cannot resist patriarchy, she at least paves the way for the younger generation of women in her village to challenge the dominance of patriarchy and its authority. She is a good example for women to challenge the authority of men. As Hosseini Maasoum has pointed out, "although her protests do not lead to a good result, but the important thing, for a feminist point of view, is that a woman is situated against a man and expresses her own identity" (2012, 350).

## **Conclusion**

These texts present a living example of a rigid patriarchal society. Although the writers place women in different situations, the way women are treated remains more or less the same. The image that the old woman presents in "My First Goose" reflects an exact picture of

women in the village of Jackson's story. Jackson and Babel create a very terrifying image about human reality and the way people used to treat women. However, one must conclude that traditions are sometimes used as a device to keep certain ideologies unquestioned as is the case in the two stories examined above. The annual lottery which the villagers carry out is evident to be a very patriarchal tool or device to keep women controlled by men. There is no single man in the story wishing to question this futile and time wasting activity. This notion leads one to say that there is a strong relationship between this patriarchal duo: ideology and tradition. On the other hand, there is no single woman in "The Lottery," with the exception of Tessie, to question such duo because the society in which women are placed in the story is structured to serve the male, given the fact that man is born to occupy the center and woman the margin. This notion is further explained in "My First Goose." Unlike Jackson, Babel overlooks the question of whether patriarchy can be challenged and resisted. Instead, he makes patriarchy appear as something which resists all forms of rebellion. This is why he placed woman in a military situation. His aim is to show man's authority in comparison to woman's. In any case, Jackson and Babel succeed in exploring the patriarchal forces that dominate man's control over woman and the tools that keep this control unquestioned.

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