

A Critical Examination of Patriarchal Structures and Female Subjugation in *What's Love Got to Do with It?* (2023)

Khuram Dad¹, Ismail Abbasi², Iram Shabbir³

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English, Govt. Graduate College, Satellite Town, Rawalpindi, Pakistan.

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Govt. Graduate College, Satellite Town, Rawalpindi, Pakistan.

³Lecturer, Department of English, Fazaia Bilquis College of Education for Women, Rawalpindi, Pakistan.

Correspondence: dr.ismail.hed@gmail.com²

ABSTRACT

Aim of Study: This research critically examines the patriarchal structures and female subjugation depicted in the movie *What's Love Got to Do with It?* (2023). The study aims to uncover how traditional gender roles and patriarchal expectations impact women's lives, particularly in marriage decisions.

Methodology: The study employs a qualitative content analysis approach, utilizing dialogues from the film to explore underlying patriarchal themes and gender stereotypes. The theoretical framework is based on Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, focusing on gender as a social construct, women as the "Other," women's immanence and domestic duties, and women's alienation.

Findings: Key findings include that Kazim's father desires for a non-ambitious daughter-in-law reflects the patriarchal fear of women's liberty. Kazim's mother's focuses on physical appearance and traditional submissiveness in a potential bride highlights gendered norms of behavior. Meymoona's hesitance and her mother's intervention in her responses indicate a lack of autonomy and forced compliance with family decisions. Meymoona's true rebellious nature, revealed in the absence of her family, underscores the dual life women often lead due to societal pressures. The eventual revelation that Meymoona was in love with someone else and felt compelled into marriage exemplifies the personal costs of forced marriage and patriarchal expectations.

Conclusion: The study concludes that *What's Love Got to Do with It?* (2023) effectively portrays the impact of patriarchal structures on women's lives, particularly in the context of arranged marriages. It highlights how societal and familial expectations enforce traditional gender roles and suppress women's autonomy. The character of Meymoona serves as a case study for the broader issues of female subjugation and the struggles women face in asserting their independence within a patriarchal framework.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Subjugation, Dominance, Existentialist Feminism, Womanhood, Others.

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Introduction

The word ‘patriarchy’ literally means the rule of the father or the ‘patriarch’, and originally it was used to describe a specific type of ‘male-dominated family’ – the large household of the patriarch which included women, junior men, children, slaves and domestic servants all under the rule of this dominant male. Now it is used more generally “to refer to male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women, and to characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in several ways” (Sultana, 2010). Patriarchy is the prime obstacle to women’s advancement and development. Despite differences in levels of domination, the broad principles remain the same, i.e., men are in control. The nature of this control may differ. So, it is necessary to understand the system, which keeps women dominated and subordinate, and to unravel its workings to work for women’s development systematically. In the modern world where women go ahead by their merit, patriarchal men create obstacles for women to go forward in society. Because patriarchal institutions and social relations are responsible for the inferior or secondary status of women. Patriarchal society gives absolute priority to men and some extent limits women’s human rights also. Patriarchy refers to male domination both in public and private spheres. In this way, feminists use the term ‘patriarchy’ to describe the power relationship between men and women as well as to find out the root cause of women’s subordination. This article, hence, is an attempt to analyze the concept of patriarchy and women’s subordination from a theoretical perspective. (Sultana, 2010).

Introduction to What's love got to do with it? (2022)

What's Love Got to Do with It? (2023) is a cross-cultural movie that holds many different themes and symbols within itself, one of the main themes is the concept of Pakistani arranged marriages in the West. This theme is what gives rise to the topic of this research, that is; exploration of patriarchal elements within a society and how these elements work and impact people moreover, how a woman can be forced into a marriage because of these norms.

This research is driven by the character of Maymoona Khan, a young girl from Pakistan who marries Kazim Khan, a doctor from England. This study would explore how arranged or assisted marriages are often turned into forced marriages thus confirming the stereotypical gender roles that still exist in the minds of the people in the 21st century.

Statement of the Problem

Arranged and assisted marriages have always been common in our country, the movie *What's Love Got to Do with It?* (2023) also deals with the same concept but at the same time, it also highlights some major issues that follow this system, that are; forced marriages, patriarchal norms which work in our society to suppress women and the stereotypical gender roles defined by the same patriarchal mindset. This study also aims to explore the same issues and their causes.

Research Objectives

The present study aims to:

- To examine the impact of patriarchal cultural expectations on women's autonomy in marriage decisions within traditional Pakistani families depicted in the movie *What's Love Got to Do with It?*
- To analyze the intergenerational differences in gender role expectations and their influence on marital relationships and individual well-being in the context of forced marriages as portrayed in the film.

Research Questions

1. How do patriarchal cultural expectations shape the autonomy of women in making marriage decisions in traditional Pakistani families as depicted in the movie *What's Love Got to Do with*

It??

2. What are the intergenerational differences in gender role expectations, and how do these differences impact marital relationships and individual well-being in the context of forced marriages as portrayed in the film?

Significance of the Study

The current study adds to the existing literature on arranged marriages, gender stereotypes, and mainly the patriarchal elements related to Pakistani diaspora. Studies have been conducted on short stories and novels to explore these elements but this study is on the movie *What's Love Got to Do with It?* (2023), which offers a unique field for exploration in the field of literature.

Delimitation

The research focuses mainly on the character of "Maimoona" the supporting female actress in the movie *What's Love Got to Do with It?* (2023). This study would only be limited to the exploration of elements of patriarchy and patriarchal suppression in the movie.

Literature Review

In this section I have reviewed some studies that are conducted on the topics related to the patriarchal suppression as well as *What's Love Got to Do with It?* (2023).

Najda (2019) *The Representation of Patriarchal Ideology In Defoe's Moll Flanders* is motivated by the social reality of patriarchal ideology that always underestimates women. This study aims to describe the representation of patriarchal ideology towards female characters in the novel which includes two indicators, namely subordination and sexual violence. The method used in this study is descriptive qualitative. The data source in this study is the novel *Moll Flanders* (1722) by Daniel Defoe. The results showed that patriarchal ideology had been found at work against the main character in the novel *Moll Flanders* (1722). Patriarchal ideology is reflected through the representations in the characterization of women and the representation of men's actions toward women. Women, in the novel, are characterized as weak creatures and only able to do the domestic chores. The male characters in the novel treat the women as an object of sexual gratification, which reflects traditional patriarchal attitude toward women. This reflects that men exercise control over women's body. Women, the researcher argues, have always been subject of oppression by the patriarchal forces which is reflected in English classic *Moll Flanders* (1722).

Ansar (2022) aims to find out about women's rebellion against the patriarchal system and to describe the impact of the patriarchal system on society. Qualitative content analysis has been adopted as research method while the existentialist feminism theory by Simone de Beauvoir has been used to analyze data gathered from the novel *Circe* (2018). This study highlights the rebellion of main character against the patriarchal system. The female lead characters were categorized as a transcendent woman because of the attempt to fight and free themselves, to think creatively and pursue their dreams. The impact on society due to the patriarchal system was appealed through acts of characters who lived and acted based on the norms and pressure of society, to be an ideal in society's point of view, women would perform in a good manner and follow all the rules of society to be a good person even if it was against their personal principles.

Nurbaity (2012) in *The Portrayal of Patriarchy in Miral Novel* aims to unveil the patriarchal forces underlying in the novel *Miral* and reaction of Nadia against these forces. This study applies descriptive analytical interpretative study by describing narrations and dialogues which indicate patriarchy and interpreting the data based on theories. This study uses a theory from Walby that explains patriarchy deals with gender discrimination and violence against women. Bardwick and Donovan's theory of feminist and traditional traits are used to reveal Nadia's reactions against patriarchy. In Nadia's life, her position in patriarchal structure is as an object of men's rule. The results of the study show that patriarchal structures encourage gender discrimination and violence against women.

Panuntuna and Chusna (2021) investigate the relevant issues in movie titled *Hidden Figures* (2016). This research study focuses highlighting the patriarchal mindset of female characters as portrayed in that film. The study explores the power of stratification and privilege distribution based on gender. The researcher used a descriptive qualitative research design in this research. The data of this research is in the form of utterances from the film. Those utterances were utterances delivered among the characters in that movie. In analyzing the data, the researcher used a feminist theoretical framework. The researcher found that the patriarchal culture as depicted in the movie *Hidden Figures* (2016) can be divided into four kinds.

Research Gap

The review of previous studies shows that the movie *What's Love Got to Do with It?* (2023) has not been analyzed before from the perspective of feminism, and gender discrimination. Similar kinds of studies have been carried out on novels as well as movies, however the movie *What's Love Got to Do with It?* (2023) is yet to be critically analyzed in this regard.

Theoretical Framework

Simone de Beauvoir, a prominent figure in existentialist philosophy and feminism, made significant contributions to feminist theory through her groundbreaking work, "The Second Sex," published in 1949. De Beauvoir's feminist framework revolves around the examination of women's oppression and the construction of femininity within a patriarchal society. Her ideas highlight the social and cultural construction of gender roles and the need for women to assert their autonomy and liberate themselves from oppressive societal structures.

The theory being applied to this research is "Existential Feminism" presented by Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* (2011). The variables/concepts extracted for this Theoretical Framework include: Gender as a Social Construct, Domestic Duties of Women, Women as Others and Women's Alienation.

Gender as a Social Construction

In the theory of Existentialist Feminism, gender is seen as a social construct where women are viewed as inferior on the basis of their social depiction. De Beauvoir (2011) about this concept, writes as "one is not born but becomes a woman" (p. 330). This shows that women are assigned fixed gender roles. These socially assigned assignments and tasks define the social and cultural of a woman in a male dominated society. Thus, it can be determined that patriarchy is a social system that is structured around male dominance, where men hold the majority of power and control over resources, institutions, and social norms.

Women as "Other"

Women are differentiated and are considered inferior as compared to the men. The men consider themselves as the "Subjects" and as capable of doing anything whereas women as "Others" are capable of doing nothing. "He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other" (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 6). By Subject De Beauvoir means the controller and authoritative while on the other hand women remain object/othered/marginalized. The authority and decision-making power remain with the man therefore, De Beauvoir rightly identifies that "she is weak and powerless" (2011, p. 6). Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist philosophy emphasizes individual freedom and responsibility. She argues that women, like men, should embrace their existence and create meaning in their lives. She asserts, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," suggesting that femininity is not innate but socially constructed (De Beauvoir, 2011). This highlights how women have historically been defined in relation to men, and this dichotomy perpetuates gender inequality. De Beauvoir also explores the concept of "Otherness," where women are positioned as the Other in relation to men who are considered the norm.

Immanence of Women and Domestic Duties

This concept of Existentialist Feminism reflects the ideology where women are not permitted by the patriarchy to surpass a certain limit in their social circle. The same cause that had assured woman her previous authority in the home, her restriction to housework, this same cause now assured the domination of the man; domestic work thence faded in importance next to man's productive work; the latter was everything, the former an insignificant addition or to be provided with the freedom to live their own lives" (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 63).

Thus, in the opinion of De Beauvoir the domestic duties that guaranteed the supremacy of women, now reduced the power of women and made them insignificant contributor to the affair of any society. The household duties are declared by the society as of having no productive and social value therefore women lost their significance too.

Women's Alienation

A woman faces alienation as a result of being labeled as "Other" and being dominant by the males. Simone De Beauvoir in this regard propagates that "generally this alienation frightens her: her fright manifests itself in vomiting" (2011, p. 63). It reflects the fact that alienation be it social or physical results in creating imbalance for women. Women get inflictions in terms of psychological and physical torture. Thus, alienation is counter-productive to women's productivity and prosperity.

De Beauvoir challenges the traditional notions of femininity and the stereotypes associated with women. She critiques the idea that womanhood is a monolithic, fixed concept and argues that women's experiences are diverse and should not be confined to a singular definition (De Beauvoir, 1949). In feminist aspects of existentialism, Beauvoir says, "What I will try to describe is how a woman is taught to assume her condition, how she experiences this, what universe she finds herself enclosed in, and what escape mechanisms are permitted her" (Beauvoir, 1949). The women are forced into a particular condition in their life. Beauvoir says, "As they are brought up by women, in the heart of a feminine world, their normal destiny is marriage, which still subordinates them to a man from a practical point of view" (Beauvoir, 1949).

De Beauvoir urges women to break free from societal constraints, to take charge of their lives, and to strive for genuine selfhood. She encourages women to challenge the oppressive structures that confine them and to work towards achieving their autonomy (De Beauvoir, 1949).

Research Methodology

This study is of qualitative nature using qualitative content analysis as an approach with a focus on concepts binary opposition as put forward by De Beauvoir (1949). Qualitative content analysis helps us uncover the hidden messages portrayed. We are better able to comprehend their underlying patterns and meanings. This method aids scholars in developing a deeper comprehension of how text shape a society. Selected dialogues from the movie are the subject of analysis to uncover the hidden patriarchal agendas of men having patriarchal mindset. The data will be collected in the form of dialogues using Netflix as the medium.

Analysis

What's Love Got to Do with It? (2023) is a movie that explores multiple themes such as love, cultural traditions and modern relationships, however our main concern in this analysis is theme of women suppression and marginalization, in the context of cultural expectations. Zoe is documenting a project on arrange marriages and she decided to capture experiences of her childhood friend Kazim in this regard. During this journey of documentary project, it is revealed that women in traditional Pakistani families face certain pressures especially when it is matter of their marriage. In the movie we find female characters grappling with societal expectations about their roles as wives and daughters. The film also explores the differences in expectations regarding gender roles due to generation gap. We find subtle

critique of the patriarchal structures within the movie as well. Though the primary focus of the film is on romance and cultural identity, it also highlights suppression and marginalization of women in certain cultural and traditional contexts.

Kazim's parents want him to get married to a traditional Pakistani woman so they consult a match maker. In the initial consultation, Kazim's father reveals his traditional patriarchal mindset when he reveals that he expects his future daughter in law to be "Not too ambitious, or too much into this women's lib" (Kapur, 2023, 00:11:53). The words of Kazim's father prove his typical patriarchal mindset, as it reflects his feeling of being threatened by women who are ambitious and who know about their rights. So, he wants his son to marry a girl who is not too aware of women's liberty. One reason for this can be that women who know about liberty and are career oriented are often difficult to dictate and control because they know about their rights. Walby (1989) states that patriarchy is "a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women". Patriarchy thus, is a system that comprises of range of social practices including fixation of gender roles. Kazim's father expect a daughter-in-law who is not much into women liberation, and it is understood by the Matchmaker as he replies "Aho Aho" (Kapur, 2023, 00:11:56) which translates to "Okay I get it". His instant replay reflects that it is one of the repeated demands of traditional parents.

Although Kazim and his family have been living in England for most of the part of their lives, yet their traditional patriarchal approach towards women has not changed. As we know that traditional patriarchal mindsets objectify women as if they are a commodity. Fredrickson & Roberts (1997) postulate that "women are sexually objectified and treated as an object to be valued for its use". Kazim's parents had the same patriarchal stereotypical demands about their potential daughter-in-law. When the Match maker questions regarding what kind of lady are they looking for, Kazim's mother responds by saying that "You know a girl from the same background, soft spoken, not too dark, whiteish complexion at the most" (Kapur, 2023, 00:11:10). This dialogue with Kazim's mother is yet another example of her stereotypical and patriarchal mindset, this proves how women are generally objectified and are judged based on their physical appearance rather than their intelligence and other related traits when it comes to the topic of their marriage. Even after living a part of their lives in England, a developed, multicultural country, the mentality of Kazim's parents is still very typical, rather than choosing a girl having good qualifications and intellect for their son, their priority is to find a girl who is good looking and presentable and belongs to the same family background as them and not only this, they want the girl to be soft-spoken. Being soft spoken is one of the expectations of patriarchal mindset from the women as they are expected to be soft-spoken and polite even when they are being abused or mistreated in a toxic household and marriage.

When Kazim interacts with Meymoona for the first time in a video call, they see each other for the first time and Kazim inquires Meymoona about the possibility of moving to London, which she is reluctant to answer however her mother jumps in and says "She is fine with it" (Kapur, 2023, 00:26:46). Thorough this dialogue we can deduce that women are not only suppressed by men but also by older women. Her mother's intervention in the conversation on her behalf reflects that she is not allowed to express her thoughts on her own, rather it is for her mother to decide what is best for her and what is not. The whole scene gives us hints regarding suppression of Meymoona as in the scene, Meymoona speaks in a very low trembling voice, hardly smiles, and replies only when Kazim speaks to her. She is covering her head and when her mother replies on her behalf, she looks back at her in shock. The scene reflects that she is neither fully independent in making that important decision of her life, rather she is being forced into it and her mother's presence in the room also proves that her Skype call was being monitored, hence all these things point towards the conclusion that Meymoona is not willingly committing to Kazim.

And this thing is further confirmed when while giving an interview to Zoe, she is asked the question "Must've been daunting for you Meymoona to choose to marry someone you hardly know" (Kapur, 2023, 00:45:23) to which she replies that "If my parents are comfortable with their decision then I'm fine as well" (Kapur, 2023, 00:45:31). Hence, we can say, that even though on the surface Meymoona's family was modern but still they forced their daughter into this marriage and thus, these quoted lines reflect that

women have little say in their choice of life partner which is the most important decision of their life.

When the marriage ceremonies begin, this decision making and dictation of ideal behavior continues. During the wedding function, we find Kazim's grandmother raising objection on the shoulder revealing dresses of girls and decides not to look at the dance and leave the stage. Meymoons's mother and other elders follow suit, but before leaving Meymoona's mother directs her "Not too much smiling" (Kapur, 2023, 00:56:54). One of these socially acceptable norms is that a bride is not supposed to laugh too much at her wedding, it is considered inappropriate thus Meymoona's mother also did not forget to remind her of this cultural norm and her limits while sitting on the stage. But Meymoona wasn't really smiling or laughing too, in her mehndi scene when Kazim said "You look very beautiful" (Kapur, 2023, 00:55:13) she plainly, in a very low voice and serious manner replied with a thank you. The only time she smiled a little was when her friends started their dance performances, and that's when her mother felt it important to remind her that she is not supposed to smile too much and this remark by her mother forced her to make a serious and annoyed face. Some of her friends were wearing crop tops which were also something inappropriate in the eyes of Kazim's grandmother who immediately asked to leave the event after looking at their dresses and dance performances.

Hence, we can say that in a typical Pakistani society the bride while sitting on the stage is expected not to smile, laugh or talk too much. And these societal expectations stem out of patriarchal mindset, as we do not see any such restriction or direction being given to the groom. The marriage takes place and the couple moves to London. Few days into marriage it Kazim see's text messages from Maymoona's lover and he inquires "What should we do now?" (Kapur, 2023, 01:25:44) to which Maymoona replies "pretend". However, the couple decides to get divorced and Kazim announces it to his family on the Eid day that they are divorced. He says that "Well! it turns out this marriage was more insisted than assisted... Maymoona was...is...in love with someone else" (Kapur, 2023, 01:25:44).

This dialogue is where Kazim finally admits in front of his parents that on the part of Meymoona, their marriage was forced, she did not marry him by choice rather she was forced by her parents. This news came down as a shock for Kazim's parents because according to them Meymoona's family was modern and they would never do any such thing to their daughter. This explains the dilemma of our society, no matter how educated and modern some families call themselves, when it comes to the decision of their daughter's marriage, they become typical just like Meymoona's parents did. She loved someone else but they married her off to Kazim and it caused pain not only to their daughter but also to Kazim. Keeping in view this situation, we can argue that "patriarchy is not only harmful to women but to men as well" (Mahamuni, 2021) as it limits their ability to express emotions and form close relationships"

Hence Kazim also suffered because of this because had Meymoona told him the truth they both may have been saved from this painful marriage experience which later turned into divorce, and he may have been able to tell his Zoe that he wanted to marry her just like Meymoona may have married the person she loved. But she was suppressed and forced by her parents to marry Kazim which led to the unhappiness of so many people.

Meymoona had a jolly and liberal kind of personality which was suppressed by the domineering behavior of her parents. On the Mehndi, when Kazim's grandmother decides to leave, Meymoona says "Let her leave, when the dinosaurs leave, at least we all can relax"

Meymoona: "When dinosaurs leave, at least we all can relax . . . Now the party starts" (Kapur, 2023, 00:57:01). Her lines reflect as if this patriarchal mindset has alienated her from the people around her, even her mother who does not know the true nature of her daughter.

She was a different person, or maybe was forced to be a different person in the presence of her family but in the absence of her family she removed that veil of innocence and introverted nature and exposed her true self which was shocking for Kazim. She referred to the older people in that event as "dinosaurs" because of whom the younger people could not enjoy, this was a first glimpse toward her real rebellious

personality.

Moving on, when elders from both families left the event, Meymoona looked at Kazim with a victorious smile and said "Now the party starts" and that is when Kazim and the audience saw the real her, she takes off her "dupatta" which refers to her rebellion too, and she's seen crying on the phone too. Her friend circle included male friends who made double-meaning jokes, she drank whiskey, she danced with her male friends, and she even attacked Kazim when he refused to take a cigarette or whiskey, she thought he would be more modern but he was just boring and older than her. Her behavior is exactly opposite to what her parents idealized and thus we can interpret it as a symbol of rebellion against patriarchy.

Conclusion

In this study, the researcher has analyzed the impact of forced marriage on the two related families as well as the patriarchal system and mindset which is the reason for such marriages. The study also explores the stereotypical mindsets of people who regard themselves as modern and educated. It is an exploration of the character of Meymoona and her relationship with her own family as well as with her husband Kazim. The study explores how Meymoona is forced into a marriage because of the patriarchal society she lived in and how she takes steps to come out of that relationship.

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Conflict of Interest


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ORCID iDs

Khuram Dad ¹ <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6115-9159>

Ismail Abbasi ² <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9336-0002>

Iram Shabbir ³ <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-6329-3349>

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