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Normative Humiliation and Female Voice as Performative Resistance in The Lesson by Sowmya Rajendran

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Abstract:

Societies across the world remain structured by inequalities rooted in race, class, caste, and, most persistently, gender, with patriarchal systems relying on shame and humiliation as regulatory tools to discipline women and suppress dissenting voices. This paper examines how such normalized practices of humiliation operate within patriarchal authority and investigates the emergence of female voice as a form of resistance in The Lesson. Drawing on feminist literary theory and Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, the study employs close textual analysis to examine how humiliation is institutionalized as a normative disciplinary practice and internalized as moral conformity. The analysis reveals that female voice in the narrative does not merely articulate personal suffering but actively disrupts the moral legitimacy of patriarchal power by rejecting shame as a naturalized condition. Through acts of articulation, questioning, and refusal, female agency transforms from passive subversion into conscious resistance. The study concludes that The Lesson foregrounds female voice as a political and ethical force that challenges normative humiliation and destabilizes entrenched patriarchal control, contributing to feminist discussions on power, discipline, and women's agency in contemporary literature.

Keywords: Gender Performativity, Humiliation, Resistance, Normative Discipline.

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INTRODUCTION:

Patriarchy operates as a pervasive system of power that regulates social relations through multiple intersecting structures such as race, class, caste, and gender. While contemporary societies have witnessed progressive legal reforms and social movements challenging overt forms of oppression, patriarchal control continues to persist through more subtle and normalized mechanisms. Rather than functioning solely through coercion, patriarchy often disguises itself as protection, moral guidance, and social responsibility, thereby legitimizing its authority over women's lives.

Patriarchal societies often establish a set of norms, codes, and behavioural expectations that are presented as necessary for maintaining social order and collective well-being. Adherence to these norms is celebrated as discipline, morality, and responsibility, while deviation is viewed as a threat to the stability of society. This serves as one of the fundamental strategies through which patriarchal control operates. Women are encouraged not only to conform to these expectations but also to monitor and regulate their own behaviour in order to avoid social condemnation. As a result, women become active participants in the maintenance of

patriarchal structures through self-surveillance and internalized discipline. The fear of crossing prescribed boundaries and the severity of the punishments associated with such transgressions create a powerful mechanism of oppression that limits female autonomy and reinforces existing power relations.

Within this framework, humiliation and shame emerge as powerful regulatory practices that discipline women into conformity while masking coercion as care and moral correction. These practices operate not as isolated acts of violence but as routine and socially sanctioned forms of control that are internalized as necessary or even beneficial. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, this paper examines how such normative humiliation enforces gender norms through repeated disciplinary practices. Focusing on *The Lesson*, the study analyses how female voice emerges as a performativity act of resistance that disrupts the moral legitimacy of patriarchal authority. By foregrounding everyday acts of articulation, questioning, and refusal, the paper argues that resistance need not be spectacular to be politically transformative.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study investigates how shame and humiliation function as normative disciplinary practices that enforce gender norms through repeated social regulation. Using Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, it examines how female voice in *The Lesson* operates as a performativity act of resistance that disrupts the internalization of patriarchal control.

According to Judith Butler, identity is not fixed or stable but it is fluid and it is continuously shaped through repeated social performances. Gender is not an innate quality that individuals possess from birth; rather, it is produced and sustained through the repetition of socially prescribed behaviours, norms, and expectations. Women often reproduced the performances enacted by previous generations and gradually come to perceive these practices as natural and unquestionable. As a result, qualities such as shame, guilt, docility, tenderness, and submission are frequently internalized as inherent aspects of womanhood rather than as socially constructed behaviours. Butler argues that these repeated performances create the illusion of a stable feminine identity, concealing the social and cultural

forces that regulate and maintain gender norms. (Butler 191)

Simone de Beauvoir conceptualized patriarchy as a system in which woman is positioned as the "Other," a foundational framework that has shaped feminist analyses of gendered power relations. (Beauvoir 6) Building on this insight, Judith Butler theorised gender as performative, arguing that gender norms are produced and sustained through repeated acts regulated by patriarchal discipline.

Simone de Beauvoir's famous assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 283) is reflected throughout 'The Lesson', where women are systematically trained to conform to patriarchal expectations. The novel illustrates how womanhood is not treated as a natural condition but as a carefully regulated social role that must be learned and performed. From an early age, women are instructed through a prescribed "conduct book" that teaches them to behave appropriately, obey authority, accept suffering, serve others, tolerate injustice, and remain subservient to male control. Through these practices, patriarchal values are internalized and normalized, shaping women's identities and limiting their autonomy.

The various characters in the novel, such as the moral policeman, the dupatta regulator, the president of the adjustment bureau, and the rapist, function as representatives of patriarchal authority whose primary role is to preserve the existing social order. Their actions reveal how society continually reproduces gender norms by disciplining women who deviate from prescribed expectations and by presenting obedience and submission as virtues necessary for social stability.

METHODOLOGY

The primary text chosen for analysis is *The Lesson* by Sowmya Rajendran, a dystopian fiction that satirically reflects the contemporary world. The novel critiques patriarchy and exposes the pervasive tendency of moral policing within society. This study adopts a qualitative research approach and employs close textual analysis to examine the author's critique of patriarchal structures and social norms. Through a detailed reading of the text, the study explores the representation of humiliation, shame, gender norms, and resistance. The analysis is carried out through the theoretical lens of Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and Simone de Beauvoir's notions of woman as the "Other" and her

assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." These theoretical frameworks facilitate an understanding of how patriarchal ideologies are internalized, performed, resisted, and ultimately challenged within the narrative.

Both Beauvoir and Butler challenge traditional notions of gender by exposing it as a social construct rather than a natural reality. Their theories question the rigidity of patriarchal gender roles and reveal how such identities are produced, maintained, and reinforced through social practices and cultural expectations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing feminist studies on *The Lesson* have examined patriarchal morality, violence inflicted on the female body, victim-blaming, and the psychological dimensions of dystopian patriarchal control. Scholars have also explored how the narrative critiques patriarchal institutions such as marriage, motherhood, and socially constructed femininity. However, limited attention has been paid to humiliation as a normative disciplinary practice through which patriarchal power is naturalized and internalized. This study addresses this gap by examining how normative humiliation operates as a regulatory mechanism and how

female voice and performative resistance disrupt entrenched gendered oppression.

Feminist scholars maintain that gender is socially constructed and reinforced through early socialization that normalizes patriarchal roles of dominance and submission. bell hooks conceptualize patriarchal discipline as a system of control that enforces dominant norms through violence and emotional regulation. Extending this understanding of disciplinary power to the body, Iris Marion Young argues that in sexist societies, women's bodies are regulated through learned constraints that limit movement, space, and autonomy.

In patriarchal societies, shame functions as a pervasive emotional condition through which women internalize unattainable norms, making it a central mechanism of gendered subordination. While shame is often understood as a normal human emotion, shame attached to the female body and to womanhood itself is socially constructed rather than innate. Within patriarchal structures, shame is transformed into humiliation as a disciplinary practice designed to enforce conformity without overt coercion. Women who deviate from prescribed gender norms are subjected to humiliation by social institutions, family

structures, and community networks, and these external practices are frequently internalized through guilt and self-surveillance. The persistent fear of humiliation—social, familial, and internal—functions as a powerful mechanism through which patriarchal authority sustains control and secures compliance.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The Lesson presents a dystopian society governed by patriarchal moral policing that seeks to discipline women in the name of social order and moral correctness. Men in the narrative assume explicitly named roles such as “moral policemen,” “dupatta regulator,” “president of the adjustment bureau,” and the “rapist,” designations that expose the normalization of surveillance, control, and sexual violence within the social order. Through these stark and satirical role constructions, the novel critiques the intolerance toward gender equality and reveals how patriarchal authority disguises coercion and violence as mechanisms necessary for maintaining social stability.

A. The Moral Policeman

In the novel, the role of the “moral policeman” is explicitly defined through the

public humiliation of women who are perceived to have violated gender-specific moral codes. When encountering unmarried couples in cars or secluded spaces, the moral policeman extracts money from the men while subjecting the women to verbal abuse and inappropriate physical contact. This unequal exercise of authority reveals how patriarchal discipline targets women's bodies as sites of moral correction.

“He knew that she thought him to be something disgusting, a paan stain on a white wall. It was then that he told her to get into the car. He kissed her hard on the mouth while his hands squeezed her breasts. She pushed him away but he'd been ready to go anyway. The moral policeman never crossed the line. He knew just what was enough. She would remember this forever” (Rajendran, 14)

Within patriarchal societies, the female body is often regarded as a sacred site whose preservation is considered a woman's primary responsibility. Women are conditioned to believe that safeguarding their bodily purity and moral reputation is essential to their social worth. Consequently, even when a woman's body is violated through coercion, harassment, or sexual violence, responsibility is frequently shifted

onto the victim rather than the perpetrator. Such acts are often interpreted as punishments for perceived moral transgressions, reinforcing the belief that women are accountable for the violence inflicted upon them. Through continuous social conditioning, these notions become deeply internalized, leading women to accept blame, shame, and guilt as natural responses to victimization. This internalization functions as a powerful mechanism of patriarchal control, sustaining rigid social structures and ensuring conformity to prescribed gender norms.

The moral policeman derives a sense of superiority and moral legitimacy from these acts, interpreting humiliation not as violence but as justified punishment. Such practices expose how patriarchal power normalizes sexual harassment and humiliation as corrective measures, reinforcing gendered subordination through performative displays of authority.

B. The Rapist and the Adjustment Bureau

In *The Lesson*, the figure of the “rapist” is constructed as a grotesque embodiment of patriarchal morality, rationalizing sexual violence as a pedagogical act meant to “teach” women proper conduct. He receives daily letters of complaint and remains

preoccupied with enforcing discipline upon women accused of transgressing moral codes, revealing how rape is legitimized as corrective punishment within the social order. He explicitly states, “No decent man will want you after you are raped anyway. So you will have to live with your husband or live without any man at all. Which, as you know, is impossible”. (Rajendran, 30)

The character’s belief that humiliation constitutes the primary emotion through which women can be disciplined exposes the extreme logic of patriarchal governance. Similarly, the “president of the adjustment bureau” institutionalizes control through the formulation of a conduct manual, regulating women who resist abusive marriages or seek divorce. Together, these figures represent the structural mechanisms through which patriarchy normalizes violence, humiliation, and coercion as instruments of social order.

C. The Dupatta Regulator

In the novel, the figure of the “dupatta regulator” is presented as a supposed savior of women within the university, embodying the paternalistic logic of patriarchal protection. He scrutinizes women’s clothing, particularly the dupatta, ensuring that it covers the body in accordance with prescribed moral standards. The attitude is

evident when he states “The female students could wear anything (as long as it was longer than 2.5 inches below the knee and wasn’t sleeveless) but a dupatta was compulsory” (Rajendran, 40-41)

Women who fail to comply are rendered vulnerable to harassment, as male students are implicitly permitted to grope or abuse those deemed improperly dressed. Even women who conform to dress codes are subjected to humiliating interrogation regarding their dupatta before institutional support is extended. Through this figure, the novel exposes how patriarchal systems shift responsibility for violence onto women’s bodies, transforming regulation and humiliation into preconditions for protection.

D. The Second Daughter’s Resistance

The unnamed second daughter initially complies with the rules of the patriarchal system, exhibiting no overt resistance until her experience of marital abuse becomes intolerable. The second daughter’s acceptance of marriage demonstrates the extent to which patriarchal norms have been internalized. Although she is reluctant, she submits to the decision imposed upon her. This reluctance is evident when the author narrates “Finally, unable to take her father’s whimpers and her mother’s stony silence, the

second daughter yielded to the first man who would have her. He was a dentist by profession and smelled of fresh mints. In compensation for her ordinary looks, her father gave the dentist a fat dowry and paid for the renovation of his clinic. (Rajendran 24)

When she approaches the “adjustment bureau” seeking divorce, her assertion of autonomy is met with public humiliation and verbal abuse, revealing the system’s intolerance toward female dissent.

Her refusal to withdraw her demand and her direct confrontation with the president of the adjustment bureau destabilize his authority, transforming her voice into a perceived threat. In response, patriarchal power escalates its disciplinary measures by orchestrating rape as a punitive spectacle, intended not only to punish her but to serve as a warning to other women. The planned public broadcast of the assault underscores the regime’s attempt to extinguish emerging female individuality through extreme humiliation and terror.

Although the second daughter eventually emerges as a figure of resistance, she initially experiences intense shame and fear when confronted by the rapist regarding her punishment. Despite her desire to respond

boldly, she finds herself unable to articulate her defiance with confidence. An invisible force, shaped by years of social conditioning and patriarchal discipline, restrains her voice. This hesitation reveals the profound psychological impact of patriarchy, which discourages women from expressing themselves even when justice is on their side. In Beauvoir's terms, such experiences reinforce woman's position as the "Other," denying her full subjectivity and agency. Although her father sympathizes with her predicament, neither he nor the family can openly challenge societal expectations and offer her unconditional support. Consequently, she is left to confront shame, guilt, and isolation on her own. The emotional burden she carries makes it difficult for her to stand upright, both physically and psychologically, symbolizing the weight of patriarchal oppression.

Through the second daughter's struggle, the novel demonstrates how humiliation functions as a deterrent against resistance, discouraging other women from questioning established norms. This explains why patriarchy continues to survive despite advancements in education, legal rights, and employment opportunities. The roots of patriarchal power lie not merely in institutions but in the everyday experiences,

fears, and social interactions that shape women's lives.

E. Rejection of Shame

In *The Lesson*, the second daughter's response to the impending punishment marks a decisive rupture in the logic of patriarchal discipline. When contacted by the "rapist" regarding her punishment, she speaks without visible shame, remorse, or submission, unsettling the authority that expects humiliation to produce silence. This unexpected composure provokes an escalation of violence, leading to the decision to televise the rape as a spectacle intended to publicly annihilate female individuality. While deeply traumatized, the second daughter refuses to return to her abusive marriage and strategically engages with the media apparatus, exposing its complicity in patriarchal violence.

At the climactic moment, she removes the mask meant to anonymize and shame her, confronting the camera directly. This act transforms the mask into a powerful symbol of imposed shame and its rejection, disrupting the performative script of humiliation. "Under the sharp, white light that fell on her face like a slap, the second daughter stood, her eyes staring straight ahead." (Rajendran, 190)

By unveiling herself, she converts enforced visibility into resistance, demonstrating that patriarchal power collapses when shame is refused and discipline is rendered ineffective.

Patriarchal control is deeply prevalent in society and is often maintained through psychological mechanisms rather than direct force. Emotions such as shame, guilt, fear, and humiliation play a significant role in sustaining existing power structures. Women's voices are regulated and conditioned to conform to patriarchal expectations, and women themselves are frequently encouraged to participate in the preservation of these norms. Consequently, challenges to patriarchal authority are often perceived as unacceptable or transgressive. The fear of isolation, guilt, social rejection, and public humiliation discourages women from resisting oppressive structures, thereby enabling patriarchy to reproduce itself across generations

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that in *The Lesson*, patriarchal power operates not merely through overt violence but through normative humiliation—a regulatory practice that disciplines women by transforming

shame into moral obligation. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, the analysis has shown how repeated acts of humiliation enforce gender norms and secure women's compliance by naturalising submission as ethical and necessary. However, the narrative also reveals the fragility of this system when shame is refused. The second daughter's articulation, composure, and final act of unveiling disrupt the performative logic of patriarchal discipline, converting imposed visibility into resistance. Her refusal to internalise humiliation exposes the moral bankruptcy of patriarchal authority and destabilises its claim to legitimacy. By foregrounding female voice as a performative and ethical act, the novel reimagines resistance not as spectacular rebellion but as the rejection of shame itself. This study thus contributes to feminist literary discourse by demonstrating how everyday acts of voicing and refusal can dismantle entrenched structures of gendered power.

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