



Invisible Chains: From Slavery to Patriarchy in Selected Women's Writings

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Abstract— *Even though legal slavery was outlawed in the nineteenth century, its ideological underpinnings are still present in modern dominance structures. The shift from physical enslavement to psychological, cultural, and social forms of control shows that oppression has only taken on new forms rather than vanishing. Through a comparison of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*, and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, this essay explores the similarities between historical slavery and contemporary patriarchal oppression. The study explores how power structures govern women's bodies, identities, sexuality, labor, and social roles in various cultural and historical contexts, drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's idea of women as the "Other." The study makes the case that patriarchy acts as a modern-day version of slavery by establishing covert control mechanisms that limit women's agency and autonomy. Roy and Gordimer show how gender discrimination, caste hierarchies, racial inequality, and cultural constraints continue to subjugate women in postcolonial societies, while Jacobs and Morrison highlight the harsh realities and psychological legacy of racial slavery. The study uses a comparative literary analysis to show how institutionalized gender norms, economic dependence, and social conditioning create dominance relationships that mimic the logic of slavery. In addition, women are portrayed in the chosen texts as active agents of resistance who fight for self-definition and oppose oppressive systems. This essay illustrates how patriarchal power endures across national and cultural borders by drawing connections between South African, Indian, and African American literary traditions. It argues that even though oppressive practices have evolved, the ways in which women are disadvantaged still bear the scars of slavery. In the end, the article suggests that modern patriarchy functions as a system of invisible chains that upholds inequality while hiding its coercive nature behind social and cultural conventions.*



Keywords— *Patriarchy, Slavery, Otherness, Feminism, Gender Oppression, African American Literature, Indian Literature, South African Literature, Simone de Beauvoir, Resistance.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Slavery is one of the most cruel systems in human history. For many centuries, enslaved people were denied freedom, dignity, and basic human rights. They were forced to work without pay and were treated as property. Although slavery was legally abolished in many countries during the nineteenth century, its effects did not completely disappear. Instead, many forms of oppression continued through

social, cultural, economic, and political systems. Women, in particular, still face discrimination and restrictions that reflect the same unequal power relations found in slavery. Therefore, the legacy of slavery remains important in discussions of gender equality and social justice.

The experiences of enslaved women show how race and gender oppression worked together. Unlike enslaved men, women also suffered from sexual exploitation, control over

their bodies, and separation from their families. Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* clearly portray these experiences. These works show that slavery was not only about forced labour but also about controlling women's identity, motherhood, and freedom.

Even though legal slavery has ended, many of its ideas still exist in modern society. Patriarchy, gender discrimination, economic dependence, and cultural traditions continue to limit women's freedom. These systems often work through social expectations rather than physical force. Women are expected to follow traditional roles in the family and society, creating what can be called "invisible chains" that quietly restrict their independence.

A useful theory for understanding this situation is Simone de Beauvoir's concept of Otherness in *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir explains that society treats men as the standard while women are seen as secondary or dependent. She also argues that gender roles are created by society rather than biology. Her theory helps explain how patriarchal societies continue to maintain women's unequal position and how modern gender oppression is connected to the history of slavery.

Many women writers from African American, Indian, and South African literature have explored themes of oppression, identity, and resistance. Although their historical and cultural backgrounds differ, their works highlight women's struggles against systems based on race, caste, class, and gender. These literary works expose hidden forms of oppression and encourage social change.

Previous studies have discussed slavery, feminism, and patriarchy separately. Research on Harriet Jacobs and Toni Morrison mainly focuses on slavery and racial oppression, while studies on Arundhati Roy and Nadine Gordimer often examine postcolonialism and gender inequality. However, very few studies compare these writers to show how modern patriarchy continues the logic of slavery across different cultures. This research aims to fill that gap.

The study uses a qualitative and comparative approach based on feminist literary criticism, especially Simone de Beauvoir's theory of Otherness. It analyzes Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*. These novels were selected because they represent different cultures while addressing common issues such as gender inequality, social control, racial discrimination, and resistance.

The main objective of this study is to examine how slavery, patriarchy, race, caste, and social conditioning work together to limit women's freedom and identity. It focuses

on themes such as bodily control, motherhood, sexuality, economic dependence, cultural restrictions, and resistance.

The study argues that although physical slavery has ended, its ideas continue through patriarchal systems that control women's bodies, labour, sexuality, and identity. By comparing African American, Indian, and South African literary texts, this research shows that patriarchy acts as a modern form of invisible slavery. At the same time, these works also highlight women's courage, resistance, and the power of literature to challenge oppression and inspire social change.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between slavery, patriarchy, and women's oppression has been widely discussed in feminist and literary studies. Many scholars have examined how race, gender, class, and culture work together to limit women's freedom and identity. However, most studies focus on a single author or literary tradition instead of comparing different cultures to show how the ideas of slavery continue in modern patriarchal society.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is one of the most important works in feminist theory. She explains that women have traditionally been treated as the "Other" and seen as inferior to men (Beauvoir 6). According to Beauvoir, gender roles are created by society rather than by nature. Her theory of Otherness helps explain why women continue to face inequality in both the past and the present.

Black feminist scholars have further developed these ideas by showing that race, gender, and class are closely connected. bell hooks argues that women's oppression cannot be understood without considering the effects of race and class (hooks 15). Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins explains that Black women's experiences are shaped by the combined effects of race, gender, and class, and that their knowledge comes from their lived experiences (Collins 22). These ideas are especially useful for understanding African American literature and the lasting impact of slavery.

Many scholars have studied Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, focusing on slavery, motherhood, and sexual exploitation. They point out that Jacobs shows how enslaved women suffered differently because they faced both racial and gender oppression (Christian 54). Research on Toni Morrison's *Beloved* mainly explores trauma, memory, motherhood, and the lasting psychological effects of slavery (Christian 97).

In Indian literature, critics have examined Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* through the themes of caste, gender, and postcolonialism. Her novel shows how women are controlled by social traditions and patriarchal values.

Similarly, studies on Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* focus on apartheid, race, and changing power relations in South Africa. However, these studies usually discuss race and gender separately instead of connecting them to the larger system of oppression (Mohanty 68).

Although previous research has made valuable contributions to the study of slavery, feminism, and patriarchy, very few scholars have compared African American, Indian, and South African literature to show how modern patriarchy continues the logic of slavery. This study aims to fill that gap by examining how social conditioning, gender discrimination, economic dependence, and cultural restrictions continue to limit women's freedom. Through a comparative study of selected literary works, this research highlights the ongoing struggle for women's identity, equality, and independence.

III. SLAVERY, GENDER, AND THE FEMALE BODY

Slavery was not only a system of forced labour but also a system that controlled people's bodies and lives. Enslaved women suffered more than men because they faced both racial and gender oppression. Besides hard physical work, they were expected to serve their owners in domestic spaces and were often treated as objects. Their bodies were controlled for labour, reproduction, and exploitation, making their suffering different from that of enslaved men.

Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* clearly shows the difficulties faced by enslaved women. Through the character of Linda Brent, Jacobs explains how slavery took away women's control over their own bodies and choices. Linda is constantly harassed by her master, Dr. Flint, who tries to control her life and sexuality. Jacobs points out that slavery was especially cruel for women because they faced problems that male slaves did not experience (Jacobs 77). Her narrative highlights the gendered nature of slavery and the denial of women's bodily freedom.

Motherhood is another important theme in Jacobs's work. Enslaved mothers lived with the fear of losing their children through sale or punishment. Linda's struggle to protect her children becomes a form of resistance against slavery. Her love for her children gives her the strength to fight for freedom and challenge the system that tries to control her family.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* also examines the relationship between slavery, gender, and the female body. Although the novel takes place after slavery, it shows that its painful effects continue through memory and trauma. Sethe carries both physical and emotional scars caused by slavery. The

scars on her back symbolize the violence she suffered and the lasting emotional pain it left behind (Morrison 20).

Motherhood is central to *Beloved*. Sethe's decision to kill her daughter rather than let her return to slavery shows the terrible choices enslaved mothers were forced to make. Morrison uses this event to show how slavery destroyed families and took away women's freedom to make normal choices as mothers.

Both Jacobs and Morrison present slavery as a system that controlled women's bodies, sexuality, and family life. However, they also show that enslaved women were not helpless victims. Linda Brent resists through courage, determination, and her fight for freedom, while Sethe resists by refusing to let slavery decide her children's future. Their stories highlight women's strength and resilience in the face of oppression.

Overall, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Beloved* reveal that slavery depended on controlling women's bodies and identities. Both writers show how race and patriarchy worked together to oppress women. Their works also help readers understand that many forms of control over women's bodies and choices still exist today, making these texts relevant to discussions of gender inequality in the modern world.

IV. PATRIARCHY AND SOCIAL CONDITIONING: WOMEN AS THE "OTHER"

Unlike slavery, which used physical force, patriarchy often controls women through social rules, cultural values, and traditional beliefs. These invisible forms of control influence how women see themselves and how society defines their roles. As a result, many women continue to face inequality even in societies that support equal rights. Understanding these hidden systems helps explain the link between slavery and modern gender oppression.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* provides an important framework for understanding this issue. She argues that women have always been defined in relation to men instead of being recognized as independent individuals. According to Beauvoir, men are treated as the standard, while women are seen as the "Other" (Beauvoir 6). This idea creates unequal power relations where men hold authority and women remain in subordinate positions. Beauvoir also explains that gender inequality is created by society rather than by nature.

One of Beauvoir's most famous statements is, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (283). This means that society teaches girls and boys to behave in different ways. Girls are often expected to be caring, obedient, and self-

sacrificing, while boys are encouraged to be confident and independent. These expectations become accepted as normal, even though they are socially created.

Social conditioning strengthens patriarchal power through family, education, religion, and cultural traditions. Women are often expected to put the needs of their families before their own goals. Their value is commonly judged by their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers rather than as independent individuals. Such expectations limit women's freedom and opportunities.

Patriarchy also controls women's bodies and personal choices. In many societies, women face strict social rules about marriage, dress, sexuality, and motherhood. These restrictions reduce women's independence and show how patriarchal systems continue to influence their lives.

Economic dependence is another important form of control. Although many women now have better access to education and employment, financial inequality still exists. Women who depend on others financially often have less power to make independent decisions. This strengthens unequal relationships within families and society.

Cultural traditions also help maintain gender inequality. Many customs are accepted as normal even when they discriminate against women. Women who question these traditions may face criticism or social rejection. As a result, many choose to follow these expectations instead of challenging them.

Beauvoir's concept of Otherness explains why these inequalities continue. When women are seen mainly in relation to men, they lose their individuality and freedom. In this way, patriarchy works like an invisible form of slavery because both systems limit people's choices and maintain unequal power.

Many feminist writers have challenged these ideas through literature. Their works expose gender discrimination and encourage women to fight for equality and self-respect. Literature helps readers recognize the hidden ways in which patriarchy controls women's lives.

Therefore, patriarchy can be seen as a modern system of invisible control. Instead of using physical force, it operates through social beliefs, traditions, and cultural expectations. Beauvoir's theory of Otherness helps us understand how women's inequality is created and maintained while also inspiring resistance and the struggle for equality.

V. INVISIBLE CHAINS IN POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXTS

The God of Small Things and July's People

Although slavery and colonial rule have officially ended, many forms of oppression still exist in postcolonial societies. These systems continue through social traditions, cultural beliefs, and unequal power structures. Women often experience discrimination because of gender, caste, race, and class. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* show how these invisible forms of oppression continue to shape women's lives.

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy explores the relationship between caste, gender, and social power in Indian society. The novel shows that women are not physically enslaved, but they are controlled by strict social rules. The character of Ammu is a clear example of this oppression. As a divorced woman, she is denied respect, independence, and the freedom to make her own choices. Her life is controlled by patriarchal values that decide where she can live, whom she can love, and how she should behave. This reflects Simone de Beauvoir's idea that women are treated as the "Other" in a male-dominated society (Beauvoir 6).

Roy also introduces the idea of the "Love Laws," which decide "who should be loved, and how. And how much" (Roy 33). These unwritten social rules strengthen caste and gender discrimination. Ammu's relationship with Velutha breaks these rules, and she is severely punished for challenging society. Roy shows that women are controlled not only by laws but also by social expectations and cultural traditions. As Beauvoir explains, women are often taught to accept these unequal roles as natural (Beauvoir 283).

Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* presents a similar picture in the South African context. Set during the period of apartheid, the novel explores the effects of race, class, gender, and political power. The character of Maureen Smales struggles to understand her identity as society changes. She begins to question the ideas of race, privilege, and authority that shaped her life. Through Maureen's experiences, Gordimer shows how social systems continue to influence women even when political conditions change.

Both Roy and Gordimer show that oppression is not limited to governments or laws. It also exists in family relationships, cultural traditions, and everyday social practices. Women who question these systems often face criticism, rejection, or punishment. As a result, true freedom becomes difficult to achieve even in societies that support equality.

The experiences of Ammu and Maureen can be compared with those of Linda Brent in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. While Jacobs and Morrison describe the physical and psychological effects of slavery, Roy and Gordimer

focus on the invisible forms of oppression found in modern society. In all four works, women struggle against systems that control their choices, identities, and relationships.

Through their portrayal of caste, race, gender, and social power, Roy and Gordimer support Beauvoir's theory of Otherness. Their novels show that women are often defined by society rather than by their own wishes and abilities. By exposing these hidden forms of control, both writers encourage readers to question patriarchal traditions and recognize the continuing struggle for women's equality.

Overall, *The God of Small Things* and *July's People* show that although slavery has ended, its ideas continue in new forms. Social traditions, cultural expectations, and unequal power structures act as invisible chains that limit women's freedom. These novels strengthen the argument that patriarchy remains a modern form of oppression, making them important texts for understanding gender inequality in contemporary society.

VI. RESISTANCE, AGENCY, AND THE BREAKING OF INVISIBLE CHAINS

Although the selected novels show different forms of oppression, they also highlight women's courage, strength, and ability to resist injustice. The female characters are not shown as helpless victims. Instead, they fight against the social and patriarchal systems that try to control their bodies, identities, and choices. Their resistance takes different forms, such as courage, self-respect, survival, and the desire for freedom.

In Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Linda Brent refuses to accept her master's complete control. She struggles to protect herself and her children and continues to fight for freedom. Her determination becomes an act of resistance against both slavery and gender oppression. Through Linda's story, Jacobs shows that enslaved women could challenge injustice even under difficult conditions.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* presents resistance through memory and survival. Although Sethe suffers deeply because of slavery, she refuses to let it destroy her identity. Morrison shows that remembering the past is painful, but it also helps people reclaim their history and dignity. In this way, memory becomes a powerful form of resistance.

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy presents resistance through Ammu's refusal to follow unfair social and caste rules. By choosing to live according to her own wishes, she challenges patriarchal traditions. Although she suffers because of her decisions, her actions expose the injustice of the social system and show the importance of questioning oppression.

Similarly, Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* explores resistance in a society affected by racial and gender inequality. As social conditions change, the characters begin to question old ideas about power, race, and privilege. Gordimer suggests that real change begins when people challenge both social systems and their own beliefs.

A common feature of all these novels is that the women refuse to remain silent. Through survival, memory, courage, and self-expression, they challenge the forces that try to control them. These works show that freedom is not only about legal rights but also about self-respect, identity, and personal choice.

The resistance shown in these texts breaks the "invisible chains" of patriarchy, racism, caste discrimination, and social conditioning. The novels prove that these systems are created by society and can be challenged and changed. Together, the works of Harriet Jacobs, Toni Morrison, Arundhati Roy, and Nadine Gordimer inspire hope for equality, justice, and women's empowerment.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study examined the connection between historical slavery and modern patriarchal oppression through the works of Harriet Jacobs, Toni Morrison, Arundhati Roy, and Nadine Gordimer. By comparing African American, Indian, and South African literature, the study shows that although legal slavery has ended, many systems of oppression still exist. Today, these forms of control continue through patriarchy, gender discrimination, social conditioning, cultural traditions, and economic dependence.

The analysis of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Beloved* shows that slavery controlled women's bodies, sexuality, motherhood, and identity. These novels reveal the deep physical, emotional, and psychological effects of slavery on women. Similarly, *The God of Small Things* and *July's People* show that women in postcolonial societies continue to face oppression through caste, race, and patriarchal traditions.

Simone de Beauvoir's theory of Otherness provides an important framework for this study. Her idea that women are treated as the "Other" explains how patriarchal societies continue to keep women in unequal positions (Beauvoir 6). The concept of "invisible chains" used in this study shows that modern oppression often works through social customs, cultural beliefs, and institutions rather than through physical force.

At the same time, all four novels present women as strong and courageous. Characters such as Linda Brent, Sethe, Ammu, and Maureen refuse to accept injustice without resistance. Through survival, memory, courage, and self-

respect, they challenge the systems that try to control their lives. Their stories show that true freedom comes not only from the end of legal oppression but also from equality, dignity, and the right to make independent choices.

In conclusion, this study argues that patriarchy is a modern form of invisible oppression that continues many of the ideas found in slavery. Although the methods have changed, the unequal power structures remain similar. By exposing these hidden forms of domination, the selected literary works encourage readers to question injustice and support the ongoing struggle for women's freedom, equality, and human dignity.

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