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A Feminist Existential Study of othering in Mastur's the Women's Courtyard

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Abstract:

Khadija Mastur's The Women's Courtyard (2018) presents a compelling feminist existentialist narrative that encapsulates the struggles of women amid the socio-political turmoil of pre-Partition India. This study employs a dual theoretical framework of feminist existentialism and postcolonial feminism to examine the female characters' struggle against oppression within both patriarchal and colonial structures. Drawing from Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex, (1949) concept of the Other, the analysis explores the ways through which women are denied autonomy and relegated to subordinate roles. Tehmina's tragic suicide exemplifies the existential crisis faced by women who resist imposed gender norms but find no space for true agency, while Aliya and Chammi's experiences highlight the constrained mobility and systemic limitations women come across in patriarchal societies. In contrast, Aliya 's mother, grandmother and Kusum internalize patriarchal oppression, embodying the passive, silenced woman who has accepted her imposed identity. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) notion of double colonization and epistemic violence reveal an exploitative system in which women experience oppression at the intersection of colonial rule and indigenous patriarchy. The novel depicts patriarchy's role in obstructing women's struggles for identity, with male figures like Aliya's father, Safdar, Chammi's husband and Jameel representing societal barriers. The nationalist movement, while promising liberation, reproduces gender hierarchies that sustain women's subjugation. The novel, therefore, serves as a critique of both colonial and nationalist discourses, illustrating that female agency remains constrained by intersecting layers of power. While The Women's Courtyard (2018) portrays female resilience

through characters like Chammi and Aliya , it also underscores the structural barriers that prevent complete emancipation. This paper contributes to ongoing discussions in feminist literary criticism and postcolonial studies by revealing the intersectionality of gender, colonial histories, and social hierarchies in South Asian literature. It captures the existential and postcolonial feminist dilemma of women caught between tradition and autonomy, illustrating that without systemic change, women remain defined by androcratic structures that limit their agency and voice.

Keywords: *Feminist Existentialism, Postcolonial feminism, Patriarchy, Androcracy, Domesticity, Other, Subjugation, Oppression, Resistance, and Agency*

Introduction

The intersection of gender, colonialism, and existential struggles in South Asian literature has long been a subject of scholarly discourse, particularly in the works of female writers who navigate themes of oppression and agency. Khadija Mastur's *The Women's Courtyard* (2018) stands as a seminal text in this regard, offering a profound critique of the systemic forces that shape women's subjectivity in a patriarchal and colonial milieu. Set against the backdrop of pre-partition subcontinent, the novel intertwines personal and political narratives, presenting a rich tapestry of female experiences shaped by patriarchal control, nationalist movements, and colonial subjugation. Mastur's work not only highlights the oppression faced by women within domestic spaces but also critiques the broader structures that sustain and reinforce these limitations. The novel's protagonist, Aliya, steers into a world where women's lives are dictated by rigid social norms and their autonomy is curtailed by both familial expectations and socio-political upheavals. Through Aliya and other female characters, the novel exposes the layers of oppression that South Asian women endure. Tehmina's tragic fate, culminating in her suicide, exemplifies the existential crisis faced by women who resist societal expectations but find no avenue for self-determination. Chammi's forced marriage and Aliya's struggle for education and financial independence further illustrate the constraints imposed on women within traditional family structures. Despite her aspirations, Aliya remains tethered to societal norms, unable to transcend the limitations of her gendered existence fully. While much of the existing scholarship on *The Women's Courtyard* (2018) has focused on its historical and socio-political dimensions, this study extends the analysis by integrating

feminist existentialism and postcolonial feminism as complementary theoretical frameworks. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) concept of the "other," (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 14) serves as a crucial lens to examine the female characters' struggle against their socially constructed roles. Beauvoir asserts that women are relegated to secondary positions in a male-dominated world, their identity defined as relative to men rather than as autonomous beings. This notion is vividly portrayed in this novel, where women exist within a space of subjugation, silence, and restricted mobility, despite their desire for self-actualization. Simultaneously, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988/2023) postcolonial feminist theory, particularly her concept of double colonization, reveals a multi-layered experience of oppression—not only as women within patriarchal structures but also as colonial subjects marginalized within nationalist movements. Spivak argues that the voices of subaltern women are systematically erased, a reality starkly reflected in Mastur's narrative. Even as men in the novel engage in anti-colonial struggles, women's aspirations remain confined to domestic concerns, their narratives subsumed under broader nationalist discourses. This aligns with Mohanty's (2003) critique of mainstream feminism which often overlooks the specific struggles of women in postcolonial societies, assuming a universal framework of female oppression that disregards historical and cultural contexts. By situating *The Women's Courtyard* (2018) within the dual paradigms of feminist existentialism and postcolonial feminism, this study explores Mastur's critiques on both gendered oppression within the home and women's erasure from nationalist histories. The novel offers a compelling case for understanding how personal struggles intersect with political realities. It demonstrates that women's liberation cannot be achieved without dismantling the structural barriers that perpetuate their subjugation. This paper argues that while *The Women's Courtyard* (2018) presents female resilience, it also underscores the systemic limitations that prevent complete emancipation. Through an in-depth theoretical analysis of key female characters, this study contributes to broader discussions in feminist literary criticism, postcolonial studies, and South Asian literature, revealing the intersectionality of gender, colonial histories, and social hierarchies. The study does not merely recount the struggles of its female characters—it serves as a commentary on the enduring challenges women in postcolonial societies continue to face.

Literature Review

Feminist discourse in South Asian literature, particularly in partition literature, engages with the intersections of gender, colonialism, and

nationalism to expose the systemic oppression of women. Mohajan (2022) notes, "Feminism is a movement that addresses gender inequality and the oppression women face in patriarchy. It is a social and political movement aimed at securing equal rights for women" (p. 8). Khadija Mastur's *The Women's Courtyard* (2018) is a pivotal text that captures the struggles of women crossing patriarchal structures amidst the socio-political upheaval of the 1947 partition. This literature review examines the novel through feminist existentialism and postcolonial feminist lens, arguing that Mastur's female characters resist prescribed gender roles while confronting the compounded oppressions of colonialism, religious nationalism, and internalized misogyny. By synthesizing existing scholarship and introducing new critical perspectives, this review situates *The Women's Courtyard* (2018) within broader feminist literary traditions while highlighting its unique contributions to South Asian feminist literature. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) laid the foundation for feminist existentialism, asserting that women are not biologically destined for subjugation but are socially constructed as the "Other" (p. xx). She famously declared, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (p. 330), emphasizing that societal conditioning, not nature, confines women to domesticity and objectification. This framework is crucial in analyzing this novel where female characters like Aliya and Chammi resist patriarchal impositions while negotiating their identities in a postcolonial, post-partition society.

Recent feminist scholarship has expanded on de Beauvoir's theories, applying them to non-Western contexts. For instance, Mernissi (1987) explores that Islamic societies construct femininity, arguing that veiling and seclusion (purdah) are not inherent to Islam but are tools of patriarchal control. Similarly, Ahmed (2020) critiques the colonial and postcolonial manipulation of gender norms, demonstrating British imperialism weaponized feminism to justify intervention in Muslim societies. Mastur's novel engages with these tensions, depicting women who challenge purdah while facing backlash from both traditionalists and colonial-influenced elites. Postcolonial feminism critiques the Eurocentric assumptions of mainstream feminism, emphasizing that women in the Global South experience oppression differently due to colonial legacies and cultural specificities (Mohanty, 1988). Chandra Talpade Mohanty's seminal essay *Under Western Eyes* (1988) argues that Western feminism often homogenizes Third World women as passive victims, ignoring their agency and diverse resistance strategies. This critique is vital in analyzing *The Women's Courtyard* (2018) where Mastur's female characters are neither helpless nor

monolithic; instead, they navigate oppression with resilience and subversive tactics. Spivak (1988/2023) further complicates this discourse in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* interrogating whether "marginalized women can ever articulate their oppression outside colonial and patriarchal frameworks" (p. 104). Mastur's novel responds to this dilemma by giving voice to women who resist both British colonialism and post-partition nationalism. For example, Aliya's refusal to conform to domestic expectations mirrors the struggles of real-life South Asian feminists like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, whose *Sultana's Dream* (1905) imagined a feminist utopia free from patriarchal constraints (Hossain, 1905/2005, p. 12). The Partition of India in 1947 remains one of the most traumatic events in South Asian history, with women bearing the brunt of communal violence, abduction, and forced migrations (Butalia, 1998). Urvashi Butalia 's *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) documents how women's bodies became "battlegrounds for nationalist ideologies" (p. 89) with both Hindu and Muslim men policing women's sexuality in the name of religious honor. In South Asia, women face distinct forms of socio-cultural oppression, often exacerbated by the misuse of religion to confine women to traditional roles such as living in purdah and being restricted to domestic spaces. Inequalities in education, domestic roles, and economic opportunities further perpetuate gender disparity in the region. In the context of South Asian feminist literature particularly in Pakistan, writers like Khadija Mastur, Ismat Chughtai, and Qurat-ul-Ain Haider have explored social and cultural challenges faced by women. Mastur, in particular, is recognized as a pioneer of feminist literature in Pakistan. Her works critically engage with the themes of women's subjugation and offer a profound critique of patriarchal norms and structures ("Karachi: Khadija Mastoor's writings praised," 2005). Mastur's novel captures this gendered trauma, portraying female characters who are displaced, widowed, or coerced into marriages as political pawns. Menon & Bhasin (1998) further explore disrupted traditional kinship structures, forcing women into roles of both victims and survivors during the time of partition. In *The Women's Courtyard* (2018), Mastur illustrates this duality—while some women internalize patriarchal norms like Aliya's mother, Kusum Didi, and Aliya's grandmother others, like the Aliya, her aunt Salma, Chammi and Tehmina resisted despite societal censure. This aligns with Sangari & Vaid's (1989) argument that South Asian feminism must account for class, religion, and regional disparities when analyzing women's resistance. A recurring theme in The Women's Courtyard is internalized misogyny, where women perpetuate patriarchal norms against other women. hooks (2000) defines this phenomenon as the "colonization of the mind,"(p. 56) where oppressed individuals

unconsciously uphold their own subjugation. Mastur's depiction of female characters who police each other's behavior—such as mothers enforcing dowry traditions or mothers-in-law justifying domestic abuse—reflects this dynamic. Narayan (2013) exposes that postcolonial societies often romanticize tradition, framing feminist dissent as "Western corruption" (p. 112). Mastur critiques this rhetoric by showing how women who resist—such as those seeking education or refusing arranged marriages—are labeled shameless by both men and conformist women. This aligns with Foucault's (1977) theory of disciplinary power, where marginalized groups internalize surveillance and self-regulate to avoid punishment. While Irshad & Yasmin (2022) and Ghosh & Deka (2023) have analyzed *The Women's Courtyard* (2018) through feminist and historical lenses, few studies apply feminist existentialism to examine how Mastur's characters assert agency despite structural oppression. Additionally, existing critiques often overlook the novel's engagement with postcolonial feminism, particularly how colonial-era reforms and post-partition nationalism shape women's identities. Khadija Mastur's novel is a groundbreaking work in South Asian feminist literature, merging feminist existentialism with postcolonial feminism to depict women's struggles and resistance. By engaging with existential and postcolonial theorists this review demonstrates how Mastur's novel challenges patriarchal, colonial, and nationalist oppressions while affirming female agency. Future research could further explore Mastur's influence on contemporary South Asian feminist writers, such as Kamila Shamsie and Bapsi Sidhwa, who similarly interrogate gender and trauma in the postcolonial context.

Theoretical Framework

This qualitative study employs textual analysis to examine the multiple tiers of oppression faced by women in Mastur's *The Women's Courtyard* (2018). Belsey's (2013) approach to textual analysis, which emphasizes close and critical engagement with the text, is employed in this study to uncover the hidden meanings that reflect women's subjugation within patriarchal structures. Through a detailed examination of the characters, the analysis reveals patriarchal ideologies which permeate women's lives, contributing to their sustained marginalization. This study employs a dual theoretical framework combining Simone de Beauvoir's feminist existentialism and Gayatri Spivak's postcolonial feminism to analyse the construction of female subjectivity and agency in Mastur's novel. De Beauvoir's (1949) foundational concepts particularly her formulation of woman as the constructed "Other" (p. 14), the

distinction between immanent and transcendent existence, and the notion of "becoming" (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 330) versus being born a woman provide crucial tools for examining the systemic patriarchal denial of women's agency and autonomy. De Beauvoir challenges female subjugation by rejecting the roles imposed on them by seeking economic independence. This study applies de Beauvoir's concept of economic empowerment as one of the means of liberation. Mastur's Aliya negotiates her roles within her social confine by educating herself and becoming a teacher. As de Beauvoir contends, economic power allows women to transcend gender roles and assert themselves as subjects with the capacity to make their own choices. Spivak's interventions, especially her theorization of the subaltern and critique of "epistemic violence" (p.76) in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988/2023) expand this framework by revealing colonial and postcolonial power structures that compound women's oppression through processes of "double colonization" (p. 87) and "discursive silencing" (p. 79). Together, these theorists offer complementary lenses while de Beauvoir exposes the universal structures of patriarchal oppression, Spivak insists on the particular historical and cultural contexts that shape female experiences in postcolonial societies. This integrated approach enables analysis of both the existential dimensions of women's oppression and the specific mechanisms through which colonial and nationalist discourses reinforce gendered hierarchies. The framework proves particularly valuable for examining texts that explore the intersection of gender and colonial/postcolonial power structures, allowing for nuanced investigation of how female characters navigate, resist, or internalize systems of oppression while accounting for both the psychological dimensions of subjugation and the material realities of colonial legacy. By maintaining de Beauvoir's focus on agency and transcendence while incorporating Spivak's attention to historical particularity and representational politics, this theoretical synthesis avoids the Western-centric limitations of existential feminism alone while preserving its critical insights into the structures of patriarchal oppression.

Analysis

Female Suppression and Patriarchal Cultures

In Eastern traditions, women are systematically relegated to a subordinate position through gendered ideologies that permeate all facets of life—domestic, social, political, and economic. These ideologies, as Simone de Beauvoir (1949) explains, function by casting women as the "Other," denying them subjectivity and positioning them as passive beings in relation to the male-

defined norm. The internalization of male dominance is a core mechanism of patriarchal control, whereby societal norms are naturalized and presented as universal truths. As Ahmed (2020) observes, women are deliberately excluded from intellectual and political life based on entrenched stereotypes that deem them irrational, thereby ensuring their continued dependence and domestic confinement. Belsey's (2013) method of textual analysis, reveals Khadija Mastur's *The Women's Courtyard* (2018) illustrates the structural mechanisms that silence female expression. The political realm is evidently gendered in the novel while Azhar - Aliya 's father, uncle Mazhar, and cousin Jameel participate in discussions about Congress and the Muslim League, women are denied the same discursive space. When Chammi, a female character, dares to express political agency by organising a rally in support of the Muslim League, her actions provoke a violent backlash from her uncle, who declares, "Good God, this mad fool of a girl won't listen to reason. I'll break her bones" (p. 87). This moment powerfully demonstrates that women's political engagement is seen as a direct threat to male authority—a form of epistemic violence as conceptualized by Spivak (1988/2023), in which subaltern women are forcibly silenced and denied representation within dominant discourses. Chammi's punishment underscores the interplay between patriarchal control and postcolonial politics, where female voices are actively erased to preserve male-centred power structures.

Constructing Men as the Natural Superior

De Beauvoir's notion of the woman as the constructed "Other" (1949, p. 14) is further exemplified in the relational dynamics between male and female characters in *The Women's Courtyard* (2018). Traditionally societies, as Beauvoir notes, define man as the universal self, the absolute, while woman is reduced to the derivative, existing only in relation to the male subject. This ontological hierarchy is not a product of nature but of social and cultural conditioning "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 330). Through this framework, the novel exposes that male superiority is not only asserted but reinforced through religious and cultural myths that justify gender inequality. A salient example is the interaction between Jameel and Aliya during an Eid celebration. When Aliya rejects Jameel's demand for physical affection and dismisses romantic ideals, Jameel counters with a statement steeped in patriarchal tradition "All lies, a woman cannot live without loving a man, according to tradition she was even born of a man's ribs" (Mastur, 2018, p. 128). His assertion is a reflection that religious narratives are

manipulated to sustain male dominance, echoing Spivak's critique of discursive silencing, whereby cultural texts become tools of ideological control. Jameel's claim effectively denies Aliya her autonomy, framing her existence as contingent upon male authority. At this moment, Mastur presents a layered critique Beauvoir's existential analysis explains that women are denied subjecthood, while Spivak's postcolonial lens reveals the culturally sanctioned discourses that enforce this denial. Aliya's resistance to Jameel's logic, though subdued, is an act of existential defiance to accept the identity constructed for her by tradition and male desire. Her journey toward education and economic independence later in the novel embodies Beauvoir's vision of transcendence, wherein women assert their agency by stepping outside immanent roles and claiming subjectivity through self-empowerment.

Oppressive Dynamics of Marriage

In *The Women's Courtyard* (2018) marriage functions as an institution designed to entrench gender inequality and perpetuate male dominance. Within South Asian traditions, marriage is often presented as a woman's ultimate destiny, defining her identity and curtailing her autonomy. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) observed that "woman is defined by the only reference that is termed as marriage" (p. 502), emphasizing that the institution systematically reduces women to predefined roles—wife, mother, homemaker—while preserving male authority and freedom. Through Belsey's (2013) model of close textual engagement, this study critiques marriage as a mechanism of patriarchal control, using a range of female characters like Amma, Dadi, Salma Aunty, Kusum, Tehmina, and Chammi to demonstrate that womanhood is shaped and restricted by this cultural expectation. De Beauvoir (1949) critically notes that women are socialized into believing that love and sexual submission are their only paths to fulfilment "Love is not for women who have good reputations—it is only designated to men" (p. 513). In *The Women's Courtyard* (2018) this notion is painfully embodied in the story of Salma Aunty, who, upon revealing her desire to marry for love, is imprisoned within her home. Aliya's mother recalls that Salma "stopped maintaining herself properly and never combed her hair. She was kept under watch by your grandmother all the time" (Mastur, 2018, p. 17). Her punishment illustrates how patriarchal societies use surveillance and emotional manipulation to suppress women's agency and sexuality. Salma's eventual elopement, though stigmatized, becomes an act of existential resistance—a pursuit of transcendence in Beauvoir's terms—where a woman dares to assert her autonomy despite the cost to her reputation and social

belonging. The case of Chammi furthers this critique of patriarchal marriage customs. Her uncle arranges her marriage without her consent, reflecting De Beauvoir's (1949) assertion that in traditional systems, "a better half that family chooses had not seen the face of fiancé before the day of marriage—this custom is still followed in Muslim families" (p. 512). Chammi's obliviousness to her impending marriage is captured in the line, "There was Chammi, unaware of the turn her fate was going to take" (Mastur, 2018, p. 166). Her silent resignation "She simply lowers her head and surrenders. Girls are the cows of God; you may drive them where you want, they don't say a single word" (p. 187) is an indictment of how patriarchal traditions dehumanize women, treating them as property to be moved and managed rather than as subjects with agency. Chammi's fate is further complicated through intertextual allusions that invoke postcolonial cultural tropes, such as the Ramayana. Mastur draws a parallel between Chammi's abduction by her groom and Ravan's kidnapping of Sita, which Aliya references when she urges Jameel to act as Chammi's Ram. This moment underscores Spivak's (1988/2023) notion that women in postcolonial societies are reduced to symbols within male-centred cultural narratives, often denied agency and used as objects in the service of tradition and nationalism.

Marriage also serves as a site of sustained emotional deprivation for women like Aliya's Amma and Aunty, who endure lifetimes of neglect within its confines. Amma's life is shaped by domesticity and unreciprocated devotion. As Aliya recalls, her father was absorbed in political discussions while her mother was left "wandering restlessly" (Mastur, 2018, p. 35). De Beauvoir (1949) encapsulates this experience when she states, "For a woman, her house is her destiny; it is the only thing she has" (p. 536). Amma's frantic efforts to clean the home before a school headmistress's visit "Ama and Tehmina spent the whole day cleaning up the house. The new Japani set was taken out" (Mastur, 2018, p. 31) shows that women internalize their worth tied to domestic presentation, reflecting the existential imprisonment of women within the private sphere. Aliya's Aunty also suffers under a failed marriage. Alienated from her sons and ignored by her husband, she becomes a "cautionary tale" in the household, "Her eyes seemed to be filled with centuries of grief" (Mastur, 2018, p. 79). Her emotional deterioration reflects the cost of a life sacrificed to patriarchal expectations, where marriage offers no emotional or social recompense. Similarly, Sajidah lives a life of unrelenting drudgery following a marriage arranged without her consent. "From the time of marriage to the present moment, his daughter spent her life patting out dung cakes in the courtyard and raising her four children" (Mastur, 2018, p. 78). Mastur paints her as a shell of a woman, "a pile of bone gathered in the sack of pale skin," a

striking image of how patriarchal domesticity physically and psychologically exhausts women. Through these women's lives, Mastur critiques marriage not as a sacred bond but as a social contract that ensures women's subjugation through unpaid labour, silencing, and emotional abandonment. According to Beauvoir (1949), "These domestic roles do not provide women the identity and recognition that men have" (p. 550). By assigning women a narrow set of functions, society denies them the possibility of transcendence of becoming subjects capable of shaping their own destinies. Moreover, Spivak's theory of discursive silencing endorses that these women are excluded not only from public narratives but also from the very systems of knowledge production and value. Their oppression is not merely personal but historically and culturally embedded, forming what Spivak terms "epistemic violence" (1988/2023, p. 76). *The Women's Courtyard* (2018) presents marriage as a central tool of patriarchal and postcolonial control, one that disciplines women's bodies and erases their voices. Through the combined lenses of existential feminism and postcolonial critique, the novel exposes the institution of marriage functions to uphold systems that deny women both subjectivity and agency. Mastur's nuanced portrayals of female suffering and resistance contribute to a larger feminist discourse that calls for dismantling the cultural and historical structures that normalize gendered subjugation.

Maneuvering Love for Gendered Oppression

In *The Women's Courtyard* (2018), Mastur presents love not as a redemptive force but as a deeply gendered construct manipulated by men to sustain patriarchal control. Love, in this context, becomes a mechanism of emotional colonization, wherein women are persuaded to prioritize the needs and desires of men over their own subjectivity. Drawing from de Beauvoir's (1949) observation that "love is merely an occupation for men, but it becomes a woman's entire life" (p. 773), the novel demonstrates women's conditioning to equate their worth with self-sacrifice and emotional submission. Using Belsey's (2013) method of textual analysis, this section reveals how Mastur intricately weaves narratives of love to illustrate the existential and socio-cultural subjugation of women within patriarchal frameworks. The tragic death of Tehmina exemplifies this dynamic. Her unconditional love for Safdar diminishes her sense of self, as she is exploited both physically and emotionally. Safdar's intermittent visits are driven by his attraction to her beauty and financial convenience rather than genuine emotional commitment. This aligns with de Beauvoir's contention that when a "suppressed being fuses with an

absolute subject, she loses herself entirely" (1949, p. 774). Safdar's betrayal—benefiting from Tehmina's father's financial support while abandoning her—mirrors the patriarchal commodification of women's affection. He manipulates her emotions through romanticized stories, and false promises while evading responsibilities. His final letter, delivered before her forced engagement to Jameel, falsely reassures her of eternal possession, stating that regardless of whom she marries, she belongs to him. Tehmina's response to this letter, described as "an immense peace came on her face as she just received all the wealth of the universe" (Mastur, 2018, p. 58), highlights her internalized belief in love as validation. Yet, the next morning brings the ultimate erasure of her agency—her suicide. As de Beauvoir notes, "a woman feels happy to obey him… she is even ready to sit in fire to do something for her master's happiness" (1949, p. 782). Tehmina's death is not just personal despair; it is the existential annihilation of a woman trapped in a culture that offers no space for autonomous love.

Kusum's experience further reflects how love, when filtered through patriarchal and postcolonial lenses, becomes a tool for emotional and social annihilation. Married at fourteen, she is quickly abandoned by her husband, who prioritizes nationalist politics over marital responsibility. Her story resonates with Spivak's (1988/2023) notion of discursive silencing, as Kusum's voice is neither heard nor valued in her marriage. Despite his claims of love, her husband never consults her desires Kusum herself articulates: "He says to me I love you so much but never asked me what I wanted him to do" (Mastur, 2018, p. 26). As a widowed Hindu woman, Kusum faces added postcolonial and cultural stigma—denied color, joy, food, and dignity, while being subjected to constant moral policing. Though she seeks liberation through remarriage, her second husband abandons her, and society vilifies her again. Aliya's mother calls her shameless and threatens her violently, while Tehmina pales at the insult, revealing the internalization of patriarchal scorn by other women. As Aliya questions, "Why don't people say bad to a man who left Kusum and ran off? These people just don't say bad to men; they only think women are bad" (p. 50), Mastur critiques the gendered double standard that excuses male betrayal and punishes female transgression. Kusum's suicide—drowning in a pond—becomes a symbol of existential defeat and social invisibility, reinforcing de Beauvoir's claim that women often "experience loneliness and despair when those roles fail them" (1949, p. 775).

Chammi's story offers yet another layer of critique. Internalizing patriarchal myths of salvation through romantic attachment, she idealizes Jameel as her rescuer. As de Beauvoir states, "A woman obeys a man like a

God. She chooses to be her slave because she wants to overcome her situation as an inessential being; it seems like a chance for freedom to her" (1949, p. 774). Chammi believes Jameel can grant her existential validation. She sacrifices her allowance, personal needs, and dignity to sustain his affection. Her revelation to Aliya that Jameel used her money during college in exchange for manipulative affection mirrors Safdar's exploitation of Tehmina. Jameel's eventual emotional abandonment of Chammi after completing his education is emblematic of patriarchal masculinity is instrumental and opportunistic, using love as a means to secure personal advancement. This pattern, as shown across these characters, is not coincidental but structural. As de Beauvoir argues, "She devotes herself to love and wants a confirmation of herself. She becomes the slave of her essential other" (1949, p. 782). Love, thus, becomes a site of subjugation, where women socialized to view emotional devotion as purpose are ultimately discarded when no longer useful. The existential longing for meaning and connection, rather than liberating women, binds them more tightly to oppressive systems. Moreover, through Spivak's lens, these relationships represent epistemic violence, where the female subject's knowledge of herself and her worth is continually invalidated by patriarchal narratives of worthiness and shame. Mastur's portrayal of love as a double-edged sword—desirable yet dangerous, romantic yet ruinous—calls into question the romanticized ideals propagated by both tradition and literature. Love is weaponized to discipline women, demand sacrifices, and rationalize abandonment. This textual strategy is consistent with Belsey's (2013) call to uncover hidden meanings and power dynamics within literature. In *The Women's Courtyard* (2018) love is not innocent or apolitical it is a deeply ideological force that sustains gender hierarchies and emotional colonization.

Internalized Misogyny and Gender Roles

A deeper examination of *The Women's Courtyard* (2018) reveals that internalized misogyny and the reinforcement of traditional gender roles function as central mechanisms of patriarchal control. Patriarchal ideologies, as de Beauvoir (1949) explains, become most dangerous when internalized by women themselves, who then unknowingly become agents of their own subjugation. In Mastur's narrative, societal institutions are not the only perpetrators of oppression; rather, women themselves absorb and transmit these norms across generations, thus ensuring the persistence of patriarchal order. This recursive process is evident in the domestic matriarchs of the novel Aliya's mother and grandmother who perpetuate the very restrictions they once endured. Aliya's

mother, shaped by her own mother's cruelty and submission, adopts the same oppressive codes. Her recollection, "Your grandmother kept her daughters-in-law under oppression; she was cruel to them" (Mastur, 2018, p. 16), underscores the cyclical nature of this inherited misogyny. The internalized logic of control is so normalized that it surfaces in expressions like, "I'll be poisoned if any of my daughters did this" (p. 18), signalling an unquestioning allegiance to gendered codes of honour. This behaviour exposes patriarchal structures that reproduce themselves through women's complicity, a phenomenon that Spivak (1988/2023) refers to as "subaltern participation in their own silencing" (p. 91). The emotional paralysis of characters like Tehmina, who chooses death over dishonour, illustrates the deeply ingrained values, leaving women with little perhaps no room for resistance or autonomy.

Aliya: A Symbol of Rebellion and Resistance

In stark contrast to the submissive women around her, Aliya emerges as a symbol of existential rebellion, refusing to conform to the roles and expectations imposed upon her by her patriarchal milieu. Having witnessed the emotional devastation experienced by women like her mother, sister Tehmina, Kusum, and Chammi, Aliya develops a critical consciousness that enables her to resist the internalization of patriarchal norms. As de Beauvoir (1949) posits, "…her potentialities have been stifled and distorted by a system that has reduced her to the status of an object" (p. 267). Aliya refuses this objectification, carving out a space for self-definition. Her defiance is poignantly captured in her reflection on the suffering of Tehmina and Kusum: "She remembered Tehmina's dry plant of mehndi and the soaked corner of Kusum's sari. She said, 'I won't be stupid like them. Such things never happened to me'" (Mastur, 2018, p. 84). This moment marks a turning point in her journey an existential refusal to be the Other, to be reduced to an extension of a man's desire. Aliya's bold resistance to Jameel's advances and presumptions about their inevitable union exemplifies her challenge to patriarchal entitlement. Her declaration, "Who are you people to decide for me? No one can push me where one wants, I'm not Tehmina" (p. 115), signals a rejection of patriarchal determinism and a deliberate reassertion of agency.

Aliya's Quest for Autonomy and Identity

Aliya's resistance is not confined to emotional independence but extends into a full-fledged existential rejection of societal expectations, including the practice of purdah. While purdah is traditionally viewed as a

symbol of modesty in many South Asian Muslim families, Aliya sees it as a restrictive cultural imposition. Her decision to abandon it upon migrating to Pakistan is emblematic of a broader disavowal of patriarchal customs. "Aliya has given up the purdah; what was the point of staying stuck to the old customs?" (Mastur, 2018, p. 263) this becomes a powerful metaphor for existential liberation a casting off of imposed identities. Aliya's rejection of marriage proposals from both the refugee camp doctor and Safdar further demonstrates her commitment to self-determination. In a society that defines women through marital status, this choice is radical. As de Beauvoir (1949) argues, "…to decline to be the Other, to refuse to be a party to the deal—this would be for women to renounce all the advantages conferred upon them by their alliance with the superior caste" (p. 28). Aliya consciously renounces those advantages in favour of her own subjectivity. Her declaration not to become a "domesticated secondary being" (p. 47) underscores her refusal to inhabit a role constructed to limit her potential. Furthermore, Aliya's assertion of economic independence through teaching actualizes Beauvoir's vision of transcendence: "If a woman is productive in society, she can gain transcendence" (1949, p. 813). By working and supporting her mother, Aliya not only escapes domestic confines but reclaims her narrative as a self-actualizing subject. Her journey challenges the deterministic logic of patriarchal societies that insist on marriage as the ultimate validation of womanhood. Aliya's defiance, in both public and private realms, illustrates that resistance is possible, even within deeply androcratic systems. Her refusal to conform, her disidentification with submissive women, and her commitment to self-reliance signify a powerful response to patriarchal and postcolonial gender ideologies. Nearly all the female characters in this novel reproduce traditional roles, Aliya enacts a generational rupture, forging a new identity unanchored from patriarchal dependence.

Conclusion

A critical reading of *The Women's Courtyard* (2018) through the lens of feminist existentialism and postcolonial feminism reveals the intricate mechanisms through which patriarchal structures in South Asian societies systematically subjugate and marginalize women. The novel powerfully exposes the gender roles, rooted in phallocentric ideologies, perpetuate the subordination of women, reinforcing male dominance as natural and absolute. As Simone de Beauvoir (1949) articulates, women are relegated to the status of the inessential Other, a condition that is both existential and structural. Within Mastur's narrative, this condition is intensified by postcolonial dynamics, as

women are not only oppressed by patriarchy but also silenced within nationalist and colonial frameworks—resonating with Spivak's (1988/2023) idea of the subaltern woman who cannot speak. The novel's critique of patriarchal oppression is vividly embodied in the character of Aliya, who challenges the gender norms imposed upon her and actively resists the roles of domestic subservience, romantic dependency, and marital obligation. Her defiance of Jameel's assumed patriarchal authority, her rejection of marrying Safdar, and her pursuit of education and work demonstrate the existential act of transcendence, wherein a woman refuses to accept the roles prescribed by patriarchal tradition. Aliya's evolution marks a significant break from the internalized misogyny and silent compliance embodied by other female characters. Characters such as Aliya's mother, aunt, and grandmother illustrate that internalized patriarchy reproduces itself across generations, confining women to private, domestic spaces where autonomy is unattainable. Their alienation, emotional deprivation, and complicity in enforcing patriarchal values underscore how oppression can be internalized and perpetuated by the oppressed themselves. This insight bridges a critical gap in previous feminist readings of the novel, which have often overlooked the psychological and generational mechanics of internalized misogyny. Additionally, the experiences of Salma Aunty, Sajidah, Kusum, Tehmina, and Chammi reflect upon institutions like love and marriage, often romanticized in cultural discourse, serve instead as tools of gendered domination, frequently devoid of consent and autonomy. These women's trajectories reveal societal expectations that strip them of agency, pushing them toward resignation, social isolation, or even death. This paper not only critiques the structures of gendered oppression but also contributes to the evolving dialogue on feminist existentialism by contextualizing it within South Asian, particularly Pakistani, socio-cultural realities. By merging Western existentialist feminism with postcolonial insights, the study demonstrates the value of cross-cultural feminist frameworks in understanding the lived experiences of women in postcolonial contexts. Aliya's resistance represents the possibility of reclaiming female agency, individuality, and selfhood despite systemic constraints. Mastur's *The Women's Courtyard* (2018) emerges as a powerful literary site that critiques both the existential conditions of female othering and the material realities of patriarchal and postcolonial control. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how women resist, negotiate, and sometimes succumb to these structures, offering a nuanced exploration of female subjectivity, resistance, and transformation within the South Asian feminist discourse.

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