



Literature

Countering Patriarchal Hegemony in Taylor Jenkins Reid's *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*

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ABSTRACT

This research analyses the novel *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* by the American female author Taylor Jenkins Reid. The research examines the underlying factors of the counter-hegemony against patriarchy performed by the main character in the novel, Evelyn Hugo. Additionally, the study seeks to identify the forms of counter-hegemony against patriarchy depicted by Reid through the character of Evelyn Hugo. This research falls within the scope of feminist literary criticism. The theoretical framework employed includes the existentialist feminism theory by Simone de Beauvoir, as explained in her book *The Second Sex*. The results of the study are presented using a descriptive method. The research suggests two underlying factors for the counter-hegemony against patriarchy in the novel: the myths about women and the position of women as the other. Myths about women are constructed through patriarchal expectations that position women as irrational beings whose value is tied to reproductive roles, domestic responsibilities, and media-produced ideals that justify male dominance. Evelyn's otherness is observed in the workplace, the public sphere, and the institution of marriage. Reid's depiction of counter-hegemony through Evelyn involves her achieving success as an actress, embracing intellectualism, transforming society through becoming a celebrity, and rejecting the otherness imposed on her. The conclusion shows that Evelyn fulfills her existence by resisting patriarchal hegemony and achieving agency. Significantly, these findings demonstrate how literature can promote critical awareness of patriarchal norms and reframe female subjectivity, while also contributing to feminist literary criticism and encouraging broader social reflection on gender equality.

INTRODUCTION

Patriarchal hegemony describes the pervasive male domination in societal structures, influencing social, economic, and political realms. Gramsci explains that this dominance is maintained through the consent of the subordinate classes, who internalize the values and ideologies of the ruling class as universal truths (Gramsci, 1996:91; Shehab, 2023). Within this system, myths about women are propagated, portraying them as irrational and subordinate beings. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, critiques this by asserting that women are not born feminine but are shaped by societal conventions (Beauvoir, 2015:12; Mazumder and Khan, 2025). This perspective, known as existential feminism, argues against the essentialist view of gender, highlighting the societal construction of gender roles and the marginalization of women as the "other" in a male-dominated culture (Saini et al., 2025).

Literature, traditionally dominated by male perspectives, often depicts women as mere objects and lacking authentic representation (Khaja and Sauhalt, 2025; Sharma, 2020). However, the feminist movement has sparked a shift, with female authors offering more accurate portrayals of women's experiences. Taylor Jenkins Reid's novel, *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, exemplifies this transformation. The novel centers on Evelyn Hugo, a Hollywood actress, who ultimately challenges patriarchal hegemony. Reid's depiction of Evelyn as a strong, intellectual woman who asserts her subjectivity aligns with existentialist feminism, making the novel a critical text for analyzing gender dynamics and female empowerment in literature.

Research on existentialist feminism within literary criticism and feminist theory has been extensive, with scholars analyzing diverse genres, historical periods, and specific authors. This study draws on several relevant works to enhance the understanding of how existentialist feminism is represented in literature. First, Rahmani (2023) examines forms of sexism and misogyny in *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* by Taylor Jenkins Reid, highlighting how Reid, as a female author, rejects these constructs through her portrayal of female characters. This study provides a foundation for analyzing how Evelyn counters patriarchal hegemony in the novel. Das (2023) applies Adrienne Rich's theory of compulsory heterosexuality to the character of Evelyn Hugo, emphasizing Evelyn's defiance of cultural norms to preserve her queer identity. This perspective offers an alternative angle on Evelyn's resistance to patriarchal expectations. Damayanti (2023) employs a sociology of literature approach to analyze social issues such as race, class, and gender discrimination in Reid's novel. The study's focus on the intersection of gender and race oppression informs a broader understanding of Evelyn's struggles within a patriarchal society. Kusumandono (2022) employs Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism to explore gender discrimination in *The Witcher*, particularly in the character Yennefer. This research parallels the current study by examining how female characters rise against societal oppression. Finally, Prasetyawan (2016) explores the representation of existentialist feminism in Arya Stark from *Game of Thrones*. This work provides valuable insights into how female characters in different media resist patriarchal structures, enriching the analysis of Evelyn's actions in Reid's novel.

This study aims to explore how Evelyn Hugo counters patriarchal hegemony in Reid's novel, utilizing Beauvoir's existentialist feminist theory. By examining Evelyn's journey, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how literature can challenge societal norms and empower women within patriarchal structures.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research method to explore the forces perpetuating patriarchal hegemony and existentialist feminist counter-hegemony in *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* by Taylor Jenkins Reid. Primary data includes text from the novel, while secondary data consists of journals, articles, and books on related topics. Data collection involves library research, and analysis is conducted through close reading and examining the novel's female protagonist, Evelyn Hugo, in terms of her actions, thoughts, and societal context. The findings are presented in descriptive paragraphs that synthesize interpretations from both primary and secondary sources.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Factors behind Countering the Patriarchal Hegemony in Taylor Jenkins Reid's *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*

The character of Evelyn represents a woman who shows her existence as a form of counter-hegemony against patriarchy. However, before discussing this, it is necessary to understand the background that gave rise to this counter-hegemonic movement by Evelyn in Taylor Jenkins Reid's novel, *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*.

Myth Surrounding Women within Patriarchal Culture

Beauvoir explains that men have created and perpetuated the myth that women are irrational and complex beings who need male guidance (Tong, 183:2014; Kjellgren, 2023). Beauvoir outlines two

reasons why this myth of female weakness has emerged. First, it arises because women possess something men desire but do not inherently possess themselves. Moreover, women have remained silent and have not resisted the dissemination of this myth. Men tend to make themselves whole by seeking an idealized version of womanhood. This notion of the “ideal woman” refers to one who believes in the myths created by men, leading her to believe that her role is to sacrifice herself for the sake of men. This myth becomes internalized by women, resulting in the absence of resistance, as they genuinely believe that these myths are the true guiding principles for embodying the ideal woman within the patriarchal culture.

In *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, the myths surrounding women, as propagated by the patriarchal society, are evident through both media portrayal in the novel and personal reflections by the character. Evelyn is criticized for not fulfilling her expected role of childbearing, which is part of the biological function of women but has been socially imposed and linked to gender roles (Nwaka and Odoemene, 2019). Women, in this context, are expected to be “baby factories” and are valued for their reproductive functions. Evelyn’s failure to meet this expectation results in criticism and portrays her as an inadequate wife simply because Don desires children and Evelyn does not. Furthermore, the media emphasizes her failure to maintain a clean house and satisfy her husband’s desires, reinforcing that a woman’s primary responsibility is to be devoted to her home and husband. The depiction of Evelyn as irrational and envious further propagates the myth that women are mentally unstable and driven by jealousy. This overlooks that both women and men can think critically and logically (Marni et al., 2020). This misinterpretation of women opens the door for men to dominate women by promoting the narrative that women need male guidance to overcome their supposed irrationality.

The Position of Women as the Other

Within existentialist feminism, Beauvoir (2014) asserts that men are designated as *the Self* while women are relegated to *the other*. The existence of women is perceived as a mere otherness, an entity that is subsequently subordinated, positioning women as objects in contrast to the subjective position occupied by men (Wirija and Rahmawati, 2025). In the novel *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, Evelyn’s position as the other is depicted through various aspects of her life, specifically Evelyn in the Male-Dominated Workforce, Evelyn in the Public Sphere, and Evelyn within the Institution of Marriage.

1. Evelyn in the Male-Dominated Workforce

In the novel *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, Reid depicts Evelyn as an actress in the Hollywood film industry, a male-oriented area. This male-dominated work environment often positions Evelyn as an object, leading to various forms of marginalization in her workplace. This situation forces Evelyn to lose agency over herself, requiring her to conform to a made-up image designed to appeal to the male gaze. These demands are paradoxical, expecting her to portray an innocent and naive woman, aligning with male fantasies of how women should behave. Furthermore, there is a double standard faced by women in a male-dominated industry like Hollywood, which further reinforces the patriarchal hegemony and the positioning of women as the other. This double standard in aging underscores the objectification and commodification of women’s bodies and appearances within the patriarchal structure of the industry. While men are valued for their talent and experience, which often improve with age, women are primarily valued for their physical attractiveness and youthful appearance.

Another situation in the novel that underscores Evelyn’s otherness as a woman in the industry is her precarious position following her divorce from her second husband, Don Adler. Evelyn decides to divorce Don after knowing that he committed adultery, and the fact that he is also an abusive husband cannot help the situation. Unwilling to accept the divorce, Don puts Evelyn in a difficult position by demanding that she be dropped by the agency representing them both and eliminating her chances of winning an Oscar. The fact that her ex-husband, Don Adler, was able to leverage his power and influence to potentially disrupt Evelyn’s career and Oscar prospects, despite being the committer of infidelity and domestic violence, is a blunt representation of the systemic oppression and exploitation women face within the patriarchal and capitalist structures of the industry.

2. Evelyn in the Public Sphere

In their interactions with society at large, women are frequently placed in negative positions as a result of patriarchal hegemony. In *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, Evelyn, as a woman, is also depicted experiencing such situations. The description of Evelyn's physical development at the age of 13, coupled with the disturbing observation is a stark reminder of the hyper-sexualization and objectification of women's bodies that is deeply rooted in patriarchal culture. The fact that Evelyn's physical maturation led to her being ostracized by her peers highlights the internalized misogyny and toxic social dynamics that often manifest among women and girls as a result of patriarchal conditioning.

As a celebrity, Evelyn's personal life became a matter of public scrutiny and judgment, reflecting the societal attitudes that position women as *the other* and subject their personal choices and autonomy to constant criticism. When rumors circulated that her marriage to Don had not yet been blessed with children due to Evelyn's reluctance, she became a target of public criticism. By prioritizing her desires and ambitions over the expectation of motherhood, Evelyn was perceived as selfish and undeserving of sympathy or admiration. It underscores the double standard that exists for women in the public eye, where their personal decisions and autonomy are scrutinized and judged through the lens of patriarchal expectations. At the same time, men's choices are often afforded greater acceptance and understanding. It also underlines the patriarchal belief that a woman's agency and ambitions should be secondary to her prescribed roles as a wife and mother.

3. Evelyn in Marriage Institution

Beauvoir emphasizes that the institution of marriage is one of how women's *otherness* is cemented and also serves as a form of slavery for women (Beauvoir, 2015:502; Srivastva, 2025). She explains that women's roles as wives can limit their freedom. Marriage holds a paradox for women; on the one hand, it can offer security and contentment, but it comes at the expense of women's opportunities to become 'great' (Tong, 2014:184; Wilcox and Hawkins, 2024). In the novel *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, several situations depict Evelyn's *otherness* within the institution of marriage. One such situation is how Evelyn is positioned as *the other* in her position as a wife. It can be seen when Evelyn interacts with her second husband, Don. Don's outburst and frustration at Evelyn's lack of familiarity with his breakfast preferences manifest the patriarchal assumption that a wife's primary role is accommodating her husband's needs and desires, even in seemingly mundane tasks like preparing meals. His reaction reflects the entitled attitude that many men hold within the institution of marriage, expecting their wives to fulfill traditional gender roles without question.

Furthermore, the circumstances depicted by Reid below highlight Don's insecurity regarding Evelyn's dominant presence, which becomes an issue as he perceives it as a threat. Don's insecurity regarding Evelyn's professional career and perceived dominance within their marriage dynamic illustrate patriarchal attitudes and expectations that often go with traditional marriage structures. Don's insecurity becomes even more apparent when he issues an ultimatum to Evelyn regarding her career. At that moment, the context of the situation is that Don's career is down to the tubes, and then he projects his frustration and insecurity onto his wife, Evelyn.

Reid's Strategies in Countering Patriarchal Hegemony Reflected through Evelyn Hugo's Character

The strategies employed by Reid in this regard can be summarized into four approaches, aligning with Simone de Beauvoir's tenets of existentialist feminism outlined in her seminal work *The Second Sex*.

Achieving Success as an Actress

Beauvoir (in Tong, 2014:274) argues that women's entry into the workforce can become a double-edged sword. While working enables women to attain subjectification, it is undeniable that within the patriarchal capitalist environment, women remain vulnerable to oppression and exploitation. Consequently, Reid depicts Evelyn as a character who ventures into the male-dominated realm of the Hollywood film industry. By achieving financial independence through her career, Evelyn attains the autonomy to self-define and determine her destiny, thereby fulfilling her existential authenticity as a human

being. The novel elucidates Evelyn's resolute determination to escape her origins in the impoverished Hell's Kitchen neighborhood and liberate herself from her abusive father's control. Evelyn also strongly desires to pioneer her career in the Hollywood entertainment industry. After marrying a man capable of facilitating her entry into Hollywood, Evelyn contemplates strategies to actualize her ambitions. Her initial maneuver involves visiting a cafe every day, where the Hollywood elite usually spend their time. Evelyn's consistent presence is noticed by the cafe owners, leading to her employment there as a waitress, a position she accepts.

Through her proactive pursuit of work, she initiates a chain of events that enables her latent abilities to be discovered and nurtured by an influential gatekeeper. Evelyn's journey represents the existentialist tenets that emphasize the importance of continually striving to construct an authentic self through entering the workforce and subsequently freely choosing actions and confrontations with decisive situations. Her refusal to conform to predetermined societal roles for women is evident in her bold entry into the male-dominated world of 1950s Hollywood. By becoming a successful actress in Hollywood, Evelyn embodies the struggle and resilience of women striving for independence and self-actualization during a time when societal expectations sought to limit them to domestic spheres. However, there is an underlying irony in Evelyn's counter from patriarchal constraints. While she rejects traditional gender roles and pursues financial independence, her ascension into a higher social class is the most effective means for achieving her autonomy. Evelyn's financial freedom and subsequent autonomy are realized once she becomes part of the economic elite. This highlights a critical irony: her escape from patriarchal oppression is facilitated not just by her agency but significantly by her ability to navigate and capitalize on her social mobility. Her journey underscores the complex back-and-forth between class and gender, suggesting that in a patriarchal society, upward social mobility can be a more powerful tool for achieving female autonomy than gender-based efforts alone. This dual reliance on personal agency and socioeconomic status reveals the nuanced dynamics of class and gender in the struggle for female empowerment.

Embracing Intellectualism

Beauvoir's subsequent strategy involves women becoming intellectual agents. Intellectual activity, as defined, requires the processes of thinking, observing, and defining. Conversely, being rendered an object of thought, observation, and definition precludes one from genuine intellectual engagement. For a woman to be intellectual necessitates her participation in collective efforts to create transformative change for the feminine condition (Udemba, 2020; Mehwish, 2024). In this context, Evelyn exemplifies intellectual autonomy by skillfully navigating situations to advance her position within the competitive and often misogynistic Hollywood industry. Evelyn's awareness of her essential value indicates her capacity for keen observation and rational contemplation, enabling her to employ such knowledge for self-empowerment strategically. She wisely perceives her physical beauty as a potentially formidable asset within a patriarchal society that often reduces a woman's currency to her aesthetic appeal. Evelyn further recognizes how her physical appearance can provide her valuable path into the acting profession and Hollywood.

In pursuit of her dream of escaping Hell's Kitchen and forging a career in Hollywood, Evelyn recognized the necessity of finding someone capable of facilitating her departure from that environment. Coincidentally, she heard the news that a man was preparing to travel to Hollywood for employment as an electrician. Seizing this opportunity, Evelyn enacted a bold and calculated maneuver, knowing the circumstances' potential to further her ambitions. Evelyn's discernment in reading situations advantageously extended beyond mere self-interest. Having successfully departed from Hell's Kitchen and arrived in Hollywood, Evelyn demonstrates her intellectual resourcefulness in carving a path toward gaining recognition within the insular film industry circles. Despite her naivety and unfamiliarity in the Hollywood industry, Evelyn still finds a way to enter it. The smart thing she does next is simply hanging out in places likely to be visited by industry people. By doing so, Evelyn speculates that people there could then notice her. Her speculative reasoning that consistent presence in such environments could potentially lead to her "discovery" evinces a keen intellectual discernment of opportunity amidst uncertainty. Evelyn's calculated tactic ultimately bears fruit when a producer, enraptured by her beauty,

takes an interest in her. This outcome underscores her intellectual capacity to capitalize on even slim probabilities benefiting her self-directed ambitions.

Transforming Society through Becoming Celebrity

Reid's novel exemplifies Beauvoir's third proposed strategy, using one's platform and influence to advocate for positive social change benefiting the community. As a renowned Hollywood star, Evelyn Hugo cleverly leverages her celebrity to challenge restrictive gender norms and shift societal perceptions surrounding women and LGBTQ+ issues. Evelyn openly defies pressures to conform to traditional gender expectations. After giving birth to her daughter Connor, she refuses to relinquish her hard-won career ambitions and surrenders fully to the patriarchal archetype of the self-abnegating mother.

Evelyn's perseverance in balancing the demands of motherhood with her passionate commitment to advancing her acting career suggests a deep-seated reframing of womanhood. She represents a tenet of female self-actualization that refuses to relegate mothers to the peripheries of public spheres like entertainment and culture. Her uncompromising choice illustrates women's intrinsic capability to embrace the multiplicities of selfhood as motherhood can coexist with, rather than being consumed by other sides of their identity and aspirations. In this way, Evelyn defies and transcends the oppressive patriarchal perception that a woman's worth and purpose become singularly defined by her reproductive functions after childbirth. Her determined decision to accept the desired role despite societal pressures exemplifies rebellious resistance against oppressive norms constraining women. This subversive act boosts transformative shifts in gendered perceptions within Hollywood and beyond. By embracing her talents, she defies patriarchal expectations of feminine self-diminishment. The idealized woman under patriarchy remains an infantilized, powerless figure, submissive, and easily controlled. However, Evelyn unapologetically owns her prowess.

Evelyn's transformative impact on Monique's life exemplifies how she is a powerful figure for societal change by inspiring and empowering other women to claim their autonomy and self-determination. Through her short time with Monique, Evelyn successfully influences Monique to disrupt the patriarchal hegemony that specifically holds her to the ground. Monique's frank statement that she would not have had the fortitude to make crucial life choices - ending an unhappy marriage, confronting a domineering co-worker, pursuing her literary ambitions, or grasping the depths of her self-worth - without Evelyn's guidance illustrates the profound transformative effect of Evelyn's influence. Evelyn takes place as an inspiring force for Monique's liberation from restrictive gender roles and expectations. From extricating herself from an unfulfilling marriage, asserting her voice against domineering influences, fearlessly pursuing her professional dreams, and reframing narratives about her self-worth. Evelyn's existence as a woman uncompromisingly authoring the script of her complex identity encouraged Monique to extricate herself from circumstances and relationships that diminished her sovereignty.

Her decision to publish her biography is certainly a breakthrough for her to show women out there that they should learn from Evelyn how to be strong, independent, and intelligent so they do not live within the confines of patriarchy. By openly discussing her sexual orientation identity as a bisexual woman, Evelyn challenges the simplistic narratives and stereotypes often applied to LGBTQ+ individuals. This serves as a critique of society's tendency to compartmentalize people and thus encourages broader recognition and understanding of the complexity of sexual identity. Evelyn's statement highlights the importance of acknowledging and respecting the entirety of an individual's identity rather than reducing them to narrow categorizations. This resonates with advocating for inclusivity and acceptance of diverse identities within society. Furthermore, Evelyn's bold assertion of her bisexual identity adds depth to her character and underscores her role as a pioneer in challenging societal norms and expectations.

Rejecting Evelyn's Otherness

In the context of Simone de Beauvoir's fourth strategy, which emphasizes that women are capable of rejecting their *otherness*. This refers to the condition where women can free themselves from environments that do not allow them to engage in activities they are truly capable of (Ahmadi, 2026). In this novel, *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, Reid portrays her main character, Evelyn, as able to defy social norms, which then positions her as a subject. In this situation, Evelyn still demonstrates a sense

of power over Billy through her body. Although she initially became a victim of sexual harassment, she then used the situation to her advantage by taking items from the store as compensation. By doing so, Evelyn was exploiting Billy's sexual desire and positioning herself as the party with power or the subject in that relationship. She used her body as a tool to get what she wanted from the store, even though this was a limited form of resistance that she could undertake. This can be seen as Evelyn's attempt to reject being pure as *the other* or as an object as conceptualized by Beauvoir. This demonstrates Evelyn's effort to reject her *otherness*, even within her limited capacity.

Furthermore, Evelyn is acutely aware of the future she would face if she remained in her first marriage with Ernie Diaz. A marriage that would require her to serve her husband sexually and take care of domestic matters. She realizes she can reject such conditions by pursuing a career in Hollywood. However, she refuses to accept a future that would render her as *the other* or an object of limiting circumstances. This aligns with Simone de Beauvoir's fourth strategy, emphasizing women's ability to reject *otherness* and conditions that do not allow them to fulfill their full potential. Reid portrays Evelyn as displaying awareness and rejection of an environment that seeks to confine her to limited roles as a wife and poor housewife. Thus, it can be concluded that Evelyn is freeing herself from *otherness* by rejecting the portrayal of a future that limits her freedom and autonomy. She advocates for herself as an autonomous subject, not a passive object of situations seeking to shackle her existence and potential.

CONCLUSIONS

After analyzing *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, it is concluded that Reid effectively portrays situations that lead to a counter-hegemonic movement against patriarchy by women. These movements arise due to myths propagated by men in their attempt to dominate women. Such myths depict women as weak and irrational beings who need men. The internalization of these myths leads to women being positioned as secondary or *the other* concerning men in society. In response to the degraded position of women in society, Reid employs feminist narrative strategies through the character of Evelyn Hugo. This counteraction is reflected in several contexts: Evelyn achieves success as an actress, embraces intellectualism, and transforms society as an influential celebrity. Additionally, Evelyn's rejection of otherness within the patriarchal hegemony is evident in the novel. In conclusion, this research enriches literary discourse and fosters a deeper understanding of the ongoing struggle against patriarchal hegemony. Examining the counter-hegemonic movements in *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* provides valuable insights into the transformative power of feminist narratives and their role in shaping a more equitable society. In order to build more insights presented in this research, the writer suggests that future research may focus specifically on the LGBTQ+ issues depicted in *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*. Moreover, future research may well investigate the intersection between class and gender, analyzing how women navigate and fight for their freedom within a patriarchal society.

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