



FEMALE CHARACTERS' RESISTANCE TO PATRIARCHAL PRACTICES IN SAINT'S HERA: A RADICAL FEMINIST ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This article explores how female characters in Jennifer Saint's contemporary retelling of Greek mythology, Hera (2024), both mirror and oppose patriarchal norms. The study uses feminist literary criticism, analyzing the female characters' acts of resistance using Rosemarie Tong's Feminist Thought (2009) and identifying the patriarchal institutions depicted in the text with Kate Millett's Sexual Politics (2000). This analysis, which takes a qualitative descriptive method, focuses on close reading strategies to reveal how mythical stories can be reframed to subvert male authority and strengthen female autonomy. The results show that the novel depicts patriarchy through the subordination of the female body and the consolidation of male authority, which are ingrained in both domestic and divine power structures. The female characters respond by acting in ways that are representative of radical feminist tactics, such as refusing to play roles that have been prescribed to them, challenging male authority, and regaining control over their bodies and identities. These narrative decisions reveal the manufactured character of patriarchal power in addition to reimagining the roles of mythological women. The study demonstrates how patriarchal structures, despite their deep roots, may be challenged and redefined via resistance, both in fictional texts and in larger society discourse, and it confirms that literature is a powerful medium for criticizing gender inequality.

Keywords: Female Resistance; Feminism; Patriarchy; Patriarchal Practices; Radical Feminism

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INTRODUCTION

Literature plays a central role in both mirroring and challenging the social, political, and cultural realities that shape human life. Sridevi (2024: 216) claims that literature functions as more than mere artistic expression; it is a medium through which dominant ideologies, values, and power structures are revealed, critiqued, and occasionally dismantled. One of the enduring power systems embedded within literature is patriarchy, a hierarchical structure that privileges men while systematically subjugating women through a range of institutional, cultural, and interpersonal mechanisms. Across historical and contemporary texts,

patriarchal systems have influenced the portrayal of gender roles, familial structures, and the allocation of agency and voice. As such, literature becomes a vital resource in gender studies, providing insight into how patriarchal ideologies are reinforced and, crucially, how they can be resisted.

According to Pierik (2022: 74), the term patriarchy, derived from the Greek word *πατριάρχισι* (patriárchisi), originally referred to the authority of the male head within a family structure. Over time, the definition has expanded beyond familial hierarchies to encompass a broader sociopolitical system in which male dominance permeates various sectors, including law, education, religion, politics, and culture. According to Millett (2000), patriarchy is not a biological or natural arrangement but a constructed and perpetuated social system. It is maintained through learned behaviors, cultural expectations, and institutional practices that prioritize male authority. As states by Brandmaier (2015: 1), in patriarchal societies, women's value is often reduced to reproductive and domestic roles, while their intellectual, creative, and political contributions are minimized or erased. This gendered hierarchy becomes internalized by individuals and societies alike, rendering it both systemic and psychological.

Feminist literary criticism, as a methodological approach, seeks to expose and interrogate these patriarchal patterns within literary texts (Tyson, 2006: 83). By analyzing how women are represented and how narratives structure gender dynamics, feminist critics reveal how literature has historically participated in the Tong (2009) marginalization of women, but also how it offers space for resistance. Feminist theorists like Kate Millett and Rosemarie Tong have made significant contributions to this field. Millett's *Sexual Politics* (2000) was among the first works to systematically examine how patriarchal power is embedded in cultural production. She argued that literature, as a form of ideology, not only reflects but also reinforces male dominance by promoting norms that glorify male power and silence female agency. Millett's work remains foundational for scholars examining gendered power structures in narrative fiction.

Radical feminism, as developed and articulated by theorists such as Tong (2009), goes beyond liberal demands for equality within the system and instead

calls for a complete dismantling of patriarchy. This framework critiques not only legal and economic inequality but also the deep-rooted cultural and sexual oppression that sustains male dominance. Radical feminists identify violence, coercion, and control over women's bodies as fundamental tools of patriarchy (Cottais, 2021). They emphasize that true liberation can only be achieved when these root causes are addressed. Tong's *Feminist Thought* (2009) provides a thorough exploration of radical feminist positions and highlights how female resistance can manifest in diverse and strategic ways, from rejecting traditional gender roles to challenging institutionalized sexual exploitation.

Jennifer Saint's *Hera* (2024) is a compelling example of this emerging literary trend. The novel revisits the myth of Hera, the goddess of marriage, often depicted in classical mythology as a jealous and vengeful wife. Rather than adhering to these traditional portrayals, Saint offers a reimagined version of Hera as a woman constrained by divine patriarchy, yet capable of complex thought, strategic rebellion, and subtle resistance. In this version, Zeus divides the world into three domains ruled by himself, Hades, and Poseidon, excluding Hera despite their shared lineage. Her status as a goddess and consort is rendered hollow, highlighting how even divine femininity is subordinated within male-centered power structures. Although Hera outwardly conforms to the role of queen and mother, she internally plots to subvert the patriarchal order from within, a nuanced form of rebellion that aligns with radical feminist theory.

This research analyzes how patriarchal practices and female resistance are constructed in *Hera* (2024) through the dual lens of Millett's theory of patriarchy and Tong's radical feminist framework. Employing feminist literary criticism and a qualitative descriptive method, the study conducts a close reading of the text to identify patterns of male dominance and the corresponding acts of resistance enacted by female characters. Particular attention is given to the symbolic and literal expressions of power, the use of mythology to enforce or subvert gender roles, and the psychological dimensions of resistance. By focusing on a recently published novel that has yet to receive extensive scholarly attention, this research offers fresh insight into how contemporary literature contributes to feminist discourse.

Furthermore, this study holds theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it adds to the growing body of feminist literary criticism that interrogates mythological narratives through radical frameworks. Practically, it demonstrates how literature can serve as a tool for consciousness-raising and ideological challenge, especially in academic settings where students engage with texts not just as stories, but as vehicles for social analysis. In studying *Hera* (2024), readers are invited to rethink traditional gender assumptions, to question the myths they've inherited, and to consider how narratives can be reclaimed to empower those who have historically been silenced.

Ultimately, this study argues that literature remains a powerful medium for exposing and resisting patriarchal systems. Through reimagined narratives like *Hera*, female characters reclaim their voices and agency, challenging the norms that have long defined them. Such works not only contribute to feminist scholarship but also model the transformative potential of storytelling in the pursuit of justice and equality.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to explore how patriarchal practices and female resistance are portrayed in *Hera* (2024) by Jennifer Saint. According to Creswell (2023), qualitative research is a method used to explore and interpret how individuals or groups understand and engage with a social or human issue. The research process includes developing questions and procedures, data analysis that builds inductively from specific details to general themes, and the researcher interpreting the significance of the data. The literary approach used for this study is feminist literary criticism, as defined by Tyson (2006), which examines how texts reflect or challenge the social and political oppression of women. Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (2000) is applied to identify patriarchal practices, while Rosemarie Tong's *Feminist Thought* (2009) informs the analysis of resistance strategies aligned with radical feminism.

The primary data source is the novel *Hera* (2024), from which relevant textual elements, such as phrases, scenes, and dialogue, are closely read and interpreted. Data collection and analysis follow the procedure proposed by Miles

and Huberman (1994), involving reading, coding, categorizing, and interpreting selected passages. The researcher functions as the main research instrument, applying theoretical knowledge and critical insight to examine how literature challenges patriarchal norms and elevates female agency.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study examines how patriarchal practices are portrayed and resisted in Jennifer Saint's *Hera* (2024) using Kate Millett's theory of patriarchy and Rosemarie Tong's theory of radical feminism. Through feminist literary criticism and qualitative analysis, two major findings emerge: first, the novel illustrates patriarchal domination through male authority and the subjugation of female bodies; second, it portrays a variety of resistance strategies enacted by female characters that align with radical feminist principles. This section consolidates these findings and integrates relevant textual evidence to support the interpretation.

A. Patriarchal Practices Reflected in *Hera*

1) Male Authority and Sexual Hierarchy in *Hera*

Saint's narrative reflects a divine world where male gods control political, symbolic, and sexual power. Patriarchy is shown as structural and systemic, not incidental. Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades inherit and distribute dominion among themselves, sidelining their sister, Hera. This inequality reflects Millett's argument that patriarchy guarantees male superiority through political and ideological means.

For instance, when Zeus rewards the Titaness Styx, it is portrayed not as recognition of her agency, but as validation of her loyalty to male authority:

“Styx,” Zeus says... ‘In gratitude for what you did for us, we will honour your stream now... Its waters will be the waters that all gods will swear oaths on from now on.’” (Saint, 2024: 11)

This moment reduces Styx to a vessel of male-defined honor. Her status is not her own but conferred by Zeus. Similarly, the Muses, daughters of

Mnemosyne, are not given dominions like male gods but exist to glorify their father's power:

“The Titaness Mnemosyne gives him nine daughters, and he calls them Muses... They are blessed with beautiful voices... What they sing of most often is the victory of the Olympians.” (Saint, 2024: 16)

Their voices are aesthetic tools used to reinforce the male legacy rather than disrupt it. Women are positioned as celebrants, not participants in governance or power.

Another pivotal moment occurs when the male gods divide the cosmos:

“Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades draw lots... Hera, daughter of Cronus, has nothing. The world is divided between her brothers, leaving her hands empty.” (Saint, 2024: 36)

Hera is denied a realm not because she is less divine but because she is female. Zeus justifies this exclusion by redefining authority as relational:

““You can rule the skies with me. As a queen. As my wife.”” (Saint, 2024: 41)

Here, romantic love becomes a tool of dominance. Hera's potential power is subordinated to her role as wife, and her title exists only through marriage—not inheritance or merit.

The narrative further underscores patriarchal ideology by privileging male offspring. Cronus spares Hera's life based on the belief that daughters pose no threat:

““Another girl,” she said to him. ‘A girl won't cause you any harm.’” (Saint, 2024: 55)

Hera's survival is framed not by her worth but by the patriarchal assumption that only sons matter politically.

Finally, male violence is excused and normalized. Ares' aggression is seen as acceptable because it reflects Zeus' traits:

“The boy is full of spirit, like his father,” Zeus says, ignoring Athena's plea to restrain him. (Saint, 2024: 77)

Patriarchal systems not only bestow authority on men but justify their harmful behaviors, often at the expense of female safety and logic.

2) The Subjugation Of the Female Body

Control over women's bodies is a recurrent theme in the novel, portraying the female form as a site of dominance. This aligns with Millett's claim that patriarchy is upheld through the policing of female sexuality and autonomy.

Poseidon's invasive gaze toward Hestia is one subtle yet telling instance:

“Poseidon... seems fixed on Hestia, who keeps her face determinedly turned towards Hera... Hestia shakes her head a fraction, rolls her eyes.” (Saint, 2024: 14)

Though she does not speak, Hestia's discomfort is clear. Her silence reflects the normalized entitlement men feel toward women's bodies—even among gods.

Ixion, a mortal king, fantasizes about violently subduing goddesses:

“He sees her haughty, lovely face contorted, his forearm pressed against her throat... her divine flesh laid bare.” (Saint, 2024: 23)

This scene exemplifies how female bodies are not just objectified but targeted for domination. The fantasy is not erotic but brutal—a demonstration of patriarchal conquest.

The most harrowing moment is Zeus' assault on Hera:

“She's pinned beneath his body... his forearm squeezes down on her throat... it's only when her eyes roll up to the sky that panic truly seizes her.” (Saint, 2024: 64)

Despite being his equal in divinity, Hera is overpowered and silenced. The violence is not only physical but symbolic—it confirms the entitlement Zeus feels over her body and soul.

Even mortal women are unsafe. Poseidon attempts to assault Coronis, and only Athena's intervention spares her:

““She'd have had no hope of escaping, but Athena saw and intervened... transformed the girl into a crow.”” (Saint, 2024: 75)

This act of divine protection is rare. Most female characters are left to navigate divine violence alone. Patriarchy here is cosmic—it spans gods and mortals.

Saint also explores how patriarchy isolates women by turning them against each other. Zeus manipulates their fear:

““Don't let Hera know what I've done to you, or you'll have her wrath to contend with next.”” (Saint, 2024: 105)

This fear fractures solidarity. Women become enemies instead of allies, protecting male perpetrators through silence and suspicion.

B. Female Resistance Against Patriarchal Practices

Despite systemic oppression, *Hera* showcases forms of resistance rooted in radical feminist principles. These include rejecting traditional roles, separating from patriarchal structures, embracing androgyny, and challenging male authority.

1) Challenging Male Authority

Hera gradually evolves from Zeus' consort to a calculated opponent:

““She will be his wife, the Queen of Heaven, and she will use every resource she has... to bring him down.”” (Saint, 2024: 69)

This vow marks a shift. She no longer accepts her role passively. Her marriage becomes a strategic position to dismantle his power.

Later, she allies with Typhon:

“‘We’ll burn it down,’ she tells her son... ‘Come back with your plan,’ says Typhon. ‘I promise,’ says Hera.” (Saint, 2024: 130)

Unlike many victims of patriarchal violence, Hera does not retreat. She resists from within, plotting over time, embodying Tong’s principle of subversion.

2) Rejecting Traditional Biological Roles

Hestia and Artemis explicitly reject roles as wives and mothers.

Hestia demands to remain untouched:

“‘Swear to me now that I can stay as I am, untouched by anyone else.’” (Saint, 2024: 37)

She claims the hearth not as a domestic prison but as a symbol of spiritual and personal autonomy.

Artemis rejects motherhood due to trauma:

“‘I saw what my mother endured... I don’t want that for me... Swear that no god will ever try to take me as a wife.’” (Saint, 2024: 192)

Her decision is not passive; it’s assertive, redefining power as self-determination, not relational identity.

3) Separation from Patriarchal Structures

Demeter and Asteria embody resistance through withdrawal. Demeter removes herself and Kore from Olympus:

“‘She is happy,’ she answers, ‘living among flowers on her island. She likes the peace.’” (Saint, 2024: 74)

This isolation is a protective act—freedom from the toxic governance of Olympus.

Asteria’s transformation is even more radical:

“ But her fear of the two of them had been so great, it had driven her first panicky transformation into the little bird.” (Saint, 2024: 106)

“‘Now Asteria’s a floating rock... not a goddess anymore.’” (Saint, 2024: 178)

Asteria denies Zeus access to her body and identity by disappearing from existence—an act of tragic yet absolute autonomy.

4) Rejecting Femininity and Embracing Masculinity

Athena is born armored, bypassing biological birth:

“‘She was fully formed, clad in armour – all her mother’s wisdom, all my fighting spirit.’” (Saint, 2024: 72)

She defies femininity, aligning herself with war, logic, and leadership—domains usually reserved for male figures.

Artemis also embodies masculine traits:

“‘Give me the forests... Let me be the goddess of the hunt.’” (Saint, 2024: 190)

She dresses plainly, claims dominion, and acts without male validation. Her femininity is not erased—it’s redefined.

5) Rejecting Sexual Practices That Normalizes Sexual Violence

Athena disrupts Poseidon’s attack on Coronis:

“‘She transformed the girl into a crow so she could fly away... Poseidon couldn’t find her.’” (Saint, 2024: 75)

This intervention is significant—not only does it reject divine entitlement, but it also models solidarity and protection, values often missing in patriarchal myths.

CONCLUSION

In *Hera* (2024) by Jennifer Saint, patriarchal dominance is central to the narrative structure, portraying a world in which male gods hold and distribute power while female divinities are denied autonomy, silenced, or reduced to symbolic roles. This study, using Kate Millett's theory of patriarchy, reveals how authority, sexual hierarchy, and control over the female body form the core mechanisms of oppression. Even Hera—despite her divine status—is subject to Zeus' control and violence, with her value defined by her relation to male power rather than her own agency.

However, the novel does not present female characters as passive. Applying Rosemarie Tong's theory of radical feminism, the analysis identifies five resistance strategies depicted in the narrative: rejecting traditional biological roles, separating from patriarchal structures, repudiating sexual norms that enable male violence, rejecting femininity, and directly challenging male authority. Characters such as Hestia, Artemis, Demeter, Asteria, Athena, and Hera herself embody these forms of resistance. Their choices, whether withdrawal, transformation, or confrontation, represent agency in a system designed to suppress it.

Hera's own rebellion emerges gradually—from a position of suffering, she evolves into a strategist who undermines Zeus not through brute force, but through observation, patience, and alliance-building. This transformation illustrates that resistance within patriarchal systems is possible, even if difficult.

Ultimately, the novel demonstrates that patriarchy is not a natural order but a constructed system—one that literature can expose, critique, and challenge. Through mythological retelling, Hera reclaims space for female power, voice, and resistance.

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