

EXCESSIVE SELF-SACRIFICE VIEWED THROUGH A FEMINIST LENS IN “A STORY FOR CHILDREN” BY SVAVA JAKOBSDOTTIR

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the portrayal of excessive self-sacrifice as patriarchal oppression within the home, as depicted in Svava Jakobsdottir's *Story for Children*. Using Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist theory, the project investigates how societal expectations progressively deny the mother figure her autonomy and independence. The data source for the study is the short story itself, and the research follows a qualitative descriptive nature. The research examines that the symbolic and physical bequeathing of the mother's heart and mind to the children illustrates how patriarchal cultures kill the female subject. Despite the mother's sacrifices appearing to be noble and selfless, they are unappreciated, unrecognized, and discarded once her role as a member of the family is fulfilled. This analysis concludes that the narrative is a criticism of the harmful normalization of maternal self-denial as a cultural means of limiting women's roles and agency.

Keywords: *Excessive Self-Sacrifice, Feminism, Motherhood, Patriarchy, Simone De Beauvoir*

1. INTRODUCTION

In feminist literature, over-giving self-sacrifice, particularly on the part of mothers, is broadly written about as an exhibition of deeply ingrained patriarchal norms. While self-sacrifice is widely listed as a virtuous, admirable virtue in familial life, feminist critique resists this by the assertion that overextensive types of maternal sacrifice are capable of ruining women's autonomy, mental health, and personal fulfillment. Such expectations place mothers in positions where others' needs always come before their own, perpetuating a narrative that glorifies self-sacrifice and invisibility for women (Martina Hutton, 2019).

From a feminist theoretical lens, such an expectation is not innate to women but rather socially constructed so as to maintain traditional gender arrangements where women are highly valued for the caregiving role and not as human beings. Feminist scholars have documented how this social pressure compels women to forgo personal aspirations, careers, and sanity to become ideal figures of "selfless motherhood." When women are unable to meet this expectation, they start to feel guilty and insufficient, exemplifying how these expectations are used to control female behavior in the home (Koci, 2022).

More and more literary scholarship has discussed how fictional narratives

depict the psychological and existential prices of such enforced self-sacrifice. To give just one example, studies of contemporary and modernist women's fiction have noted recurring examples of the erasure of motherhood, loss of self, and symbolic dissolution of the feminine self through caregiving demands (e.g., novels by Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, and Doris Lessing). Whereas these works, though, provide valuable insights into the Western feminist literary tradition, there remains, however, a comparative lack of focused work attempted on Nordic feminist literature, particularly symbolic maternal sacrifice.

Svava Jakobsdóttir's *A Story for Children* contains a compelling tale that compellingly dramatizes the cost of maternal self-sacrifice and stages the manner in which a mother's fragmentation of body and mind allegorizes the sacrifice of self within a patriarchal home structure. While this is an important theme, there is very little critical work given over to looking at Jakobsdóttir's writing within the framework of feminist existentialism. That absence reinforces the worth in exploring how her story does serve to further engage broader feminist forums of motherhood, identity, and opposition.

Previous research on Jakobsdóttir's short story, such as (Budi, 2020), has considered gender stereotypes in accordance with Judith Butler's theory and indicated how the female protagonist is symbolically portrayed as being emotionally and rationally dependent, consolidating domestic confinement and social expectations by symbolic representations such as the brain and heart. Other research, for example (Simamora & Satria, 2022), has employed Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist framework to consider women's resistance of patriarchal regimes in plays such as

Mother Courage and Her Children, illustrating ways in which women can act upon themselves within oppressive regimes. However, less research considers ways in which women internalize patriarchal ideals to cause erasure rather than resistance.

This study, therefore, aims to critically analyze the hyperbolic trope of maternal self-sacrifice in *A Story for Children*, pointing out how the mother role enacted by the protagonist is an enactment of patriarchal ideals that necessitate silencing the feminine subjectivity for the family's sake. In reaction, the researcher uses Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist philosophy to expose the symbolic mechanisms through which the text puts under scrutiny normative values imposed on women. Unlike other research centering around resistance or stereotypes, this study brings attention to how internalized ideals of motherhood operate as a ubiquitous but subtle form of oppression.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literary works are the result of literary creations through contemplation and reflection after witnessing various phenomena of life in their social environment. Literary works serve as a medium for authors to present creative and imaginative ideas using good language and meaning, enjoyed by literary connoisseurs (Rinaldi & Yulisna, 2022). Based on the opinions above, literary works are not only a medium for communicating imaginative and creative thoughts but, moreover, a reflection of societal values and human experiences. One of the significant topics frequently investigated in literature is self-sacrifice, which dives into the complicated flow of individual choices and societal expectations. This topic gets to be especially compelling when analyzed in

connection to social developments, such as gender roles and cultural norms, because it gives understanding into how individuals explore their responsibilities and independence inside a bigger societal framework.

2.1 Feminism

Feminist literary theory emerged as a response to patriarchal power within the literary world, where women's speech, experience, and representation have historically been silenced or marginalized. Feminist literary theory attempts to uncover gender imbalance in literature and to deconstruct how literature portrays and reinscribes patriarchal arrangements (Sağlam Can, 2022). On this basis, women are not merely viewed as passive objects of texts but as subjects of agency and valid experience deserving of examination.

Among the first foundational approaches to feminist literary criticism is the idea of the image of women, which focuses on how women are represented in texts—namely, how women characters are represented through the male view or locked within stereotypes such as the "self-sacrificing mother," the "angel in the house," or the "madwoman." Women's sacrifice is most often depicted in writing as a moral virtue or an expression of unqualified love (Sarip, 2021). However, from the feminist point of view, the behavior can be seen because of social construction and patriarchal ideology putting women in their second position, with self-erasure becoming the norm. This is especially relevant in the instance of the short story "A Story for Children" by Svava Jakobsdottir, whose sacrifice as a character can be understood as an existential action that is impacted by confinement under patriarchal forces, a move that is substantiated under the

feminist existentialist theory by Simone de Beauvoir.

2.2 Patriarchy

The term patriarchy comes from the Greek word patriarchs, which means "male head of the family." Originally, the term referred to a family structure where the father or male figure had ultimate authority. In any case, in social considerations and feminism, patriarchy is utilized to describe a broader control structure, where social norms and teaching are planned to preserve male dominance and the marginalization of women. the concept of "traditional virtues" connected to women, such as submission, tenderness, and giving up, gets to be an instrument that patriarchal social orders utilize to strengthen their subordinate position (Ullumudin, 2022). In this respect, de Beauvoir's theory is especially significant because it uncovers how these values are not normal or natural but are social developments pointed at maintaining gender disparity. Jakobsdóttir, through her short story, oversees to demonstrate the damaging results of steady self-sacrifice, both for the lady herself and for society.

Patriarchy is capable of appropriating the ideals of love, loyalty, and duty to legitimize women's status as emotional and physical servants for the family (El Arbaoui, 2023). This resonates with the literal and figurative sacrifice of the mother in the story, which reflects how patriarchy erases women's agency by covering them with a unilaterally appreciated but asymmetrically valued maternal function.

2.3 Excessive Self-Sacrifice

This excessive self-sacrifice, while regularly lauded as idealized, is truly an outline of control that limits women from

living basic and free lives. This consideration invites readers to see that such sacrifice is not a characteristic commitment but the result of social desires that must be critiqued and changed (Kryvoruchko & Fomenko, 2019). This phenomenon regularly emerges because of social norms and cultural expectations that place women in caregiver and servant roles.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach to explore the theme of excessive self-sacrifice in a literary context in an in-depth and structured manner. The study begins with a comprehensive literature review to derive a theoretical framework from feminist theory and related studies that address excessive self-sacrifice, self-existence, feminism, and domestic inequality. The primary method of analysis includes an in-depth text analysis of *A Story for Children*, focusing on narrative structure, character development, dialogue, and thematic elements related to the role of the mother who over-sacrifices herself to the point of losing well-being and self-autonomy in the story.

This study is based on the theories of female activist Simone de Beauvoir, as expressed in her work, *The Second Sex*, especially in the second volume entitled *L'expérience vécue* (lived experience). Beauvoir explores how women experience inequality in a patriarchal society and criticizes social expectations that encourage women to make excessive self-sacrifices in domestic roles. In Svava Jakobsdóttir's short story *A Story for Children*, the extreme self-sacrifice experienced by the protagonist reflects how women are often faced with relentless demands to prioritize family needs over personal well-being, a form of "immanence" described by Beauvoir.

This approach allows the researcher to analyze the narrative in *A Story for Children* by considering Beauvoir's contribution to feminist literary criticism, which highlights how literature can reflect complex social issues, such as women's self-sacrifice in domestic roles due to patriarchal norms. Thus, the self-sacrifice experienced by the main character can be interpreted because of the internalization of gender norms that position women as "the other," who must always put the interests of others before their own. The conclusions are posited through a close reading and thematic examination of key narrative elements, such as the protagonist's inner voice, behavior, and narrative structure that reveal how her agency and identity are produced through patriarchal expectations. The argument is supported by textual evidence revealing the psychological and existential consequences of her self-erasure.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1. The Main Character's Excessive Self-Sacrifice Viewed Through a Feminist Lens

In this story, the mother character faces pressure to fulfill a patriarchal role that requires women to form boundless sacrifices for their families. From the exceptionally starting, this mother totally gives her vitality to her domestic and children, indeed to the point of forgetting her own needs. Her sacrifices are portrayed as extraordinary, as when her children literally "take" her brain in the story, symbolizing the loss of her character and intellect for the purpose of the family.

Using a feminist lens, the story appears to show how the mother's excessive sacrifice is not acknowledged by her family. Indeed, after the children grow up, they still do not recognize her

sacrifice, as appeared in the scene where the mother offers her heart to her children but is rejected. This highlights how patriarchal culture views women as constrained to their function as caregivers, not as individuals with intrinsic value.

a. Devotion to Domesticity and Self-Neglect

The opening explanation of the story, *“For as long as she could remember, she had resolved to be true to her nature and devote all her energies to her home and her children”* (Paragraph 1), illustrates the internalization of patriarchal norms that make women, as it were, have a reason in life inside the domestic sphere. The words “devote all her energies” emphasize that the mother totally sacrifices herself for the purpose of the family, with no room for her individual needs.

This narrative also reflects how society often instructs women to accept these roles without question. Simone de Beauvoir explains that these norms are not, as it were, accepted but rather rationalized by women themselves, making them part of women's “nature.” Within the story, the mother not only accepts this role but also considers it a non-negotiable obligation.

The mother is depicted as caught in a routine that demands all her time, where she does not indeed can fulfill her own basic needs. An illustration is when she tries to read a magazine: *“Without letting the pot of potatoes out of her mind, she picked up the magazine and skimmed over Fru Ensom's advice column.”* (Paragraph 1), this scene appears that the mother continuously feels guilty if she takes time for herself, indeed for trivial things like reading.

Simone de Beauvoir states that women in a patriarchal framework are regularly conditioned to accept that they

must proceed to be productive in domestic roles (Rognlie, 2023). Her fear of leaving household duties for a few minutes reflects this pressure. Mother feels that her existence is, as it were, valuable if she works for the family, which reflects how patriarchy strips women of their autonomy.

b. The Literal Sacrifice of Her Body

The scene starts with her children's request: *“Mama, we want to see what a person's brain looks like.”* (Paragraph 5), Rather than rejecting or asserting her right over her own body, the mother accepts this request without resistance. The narrative at that point depicts how she continues to think about her household obligations, indeed, in life-threatening situations:

“She saw him in front of her just as he would appear in a little while: on the threshold of the front door with his briefcase in one hand and his hat in the other. She never saw him except in the front doorway, either on his way out or on his way in.” (Paragraph 6)

When her brain was removed, she experienced no major changes in her daily life. The narrative states, *“Many things even turned out to be easier than before, and situations that earlier had caused her to rack her brain no longer did so.”* (Paragraph 12). This symbolizes how in patriarchy, women are regularly considered not to need critical consideration and live out their household roles without questioning the framework that persecutes them.

Not, as it were, was his brain sacrificed, but moreover his heart. When he realized that after a long time of sacrifice for his family, his children had cleared up and now did not require him, he tried to offer his heart to them, both

truly and symbolically. Nevertheless, they rejected it.

“A look of astonishment and revulsion came over her daughter's face when she saw the slimy, red heart pulsating in her mother's palm, and in her consternation, she slammed the door.” (Paragraph 17)

This scene reflects how women's sacrifices in a patriarchal framework are frequently taken for granted but not appreciated.

In the end, her brain and heart are kept in a jar as a show thing that is eventually forgotten: *“And now they each stood on the shelf in their own jars, her brain, and her heart. But no one came to see them.”* (Paragraph 17)

Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, clarifies that women are frequently objects within the household, they sacrifice endlessly, but the sacrifice itself is never honored (Sağlam Can, 2022). The mother in this story is the exemplification of that thought: *She gives her all but is eventually ignored.*

4.2. The Mother's Role in the Story Reflects the Patriarchal Norms That Require Women to Sacrifice for Their Families

In *A Story for Children*, the mother character faces immense pressure to fulfill a patriarchal role that requires her to sacrifice herself for the sake of the family. From the very beginning, the mother has completely committed her life to the family and her children without considering her own needs. Her sacrifice is so incredible that she loses parts of herself, both typically and literally in order to fulfill the demands of her family.

The patriarchal norms embedded in society place women in a subordinate position, where they are expected to

serve their husbands and children without questioning or resisting the burden they bear. In this story, the mother, as it were, works endlessly in domestic duties and also experiences emotional exploitation that requires her to continuously prioritize her family's happiness over her well-being. Indeed, when she faces physical and psychological suffering, she continues to perform her obligations without complaint, reflecting how patriarchy has conditioned women to acknowledge sacrifice as a part of their identity (Giang & Dan, 2024).

Through the lens of feminism, this story shows how patriarchal norms shape women's lives by requesting that they proceed to form unlimited sacrifices. Simone de Beauvoir within *The Second Sex* explains that women are regularly treated as “the other,” where their presence is as significant to the degree that they can serve men and their children. In this story, the mother gets to be the embodiment of this concept, where her sacrifice is considered something characteristic and unappreciated (Rognlie, 2023).

The mother's sacrifice in this story is not as it were in terms of energy and time but moreover includes the loss of her possessive personality and autonomy. She continually conforms to family and societal desires without ever having the opportunity to become an individual free from domestic obligations. In addition, when her sacrifices are not required, she is ignored and abandoned by her children, reflecting how women in patriarchal systems are regularly only valued as long as they can advantage others.

a. The Role of Maternal Sacrifice in Reinforcing Patriarchal Norms

After losing her brain, she felt increasingly doubtful and needed the

boldness to decide things: *“More and more often she lost her poise if she stopped to make a decision.”* (Paragraph 4)

The mother's inability to make decisions reflects how women in a patriarchal system are regularly not given the space to think autonomously. The social structure that requires her to continuously take after the wishes of the family causes her to lose confidence in herself. In situations like this, women tend to feel powerless to fight back or find a way out of their prohibitive domestic roles.

Furthermore, the mother experienced mental distress that kept her caught in an endless schedule.

As she attempted to make sense of her condition, she felt she had no place to express her thoughts:

“The child-rearing columns gave little or no help at such moments, though she tried to call them to mind. They only discussed one problem and one child at a time. Other problems always had to wait until next week.” (Paragraph 4)

Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* explains that women are frequently molded by society not to question their roles. In this story, the mother looks for answers in a parenting column, but the source only gives solutions to minor residential issues without ever tending to larger issues, such as women's freedom or more extensive life choices (Saeed & Rehman, 2021). This appears how women in a patriarchal society are prompted to look for answers inside the boundaries set by the system itself, instead of looking for alternatives outside of their domestic roles.

In addition, her husband has moreover shown an attitude that reflected disrespect for her sacrifice.

After losing her brain, she casually said, *“If people only used their brains.”* This comment appears to show how, in a patriarchal society, women are regularly considered to have no insights or important thinking capacity. The mother has truly sacrificed her intellect; however, her husband still shows no empathy or understanding of what she has gone through. This reinforces how women are regularly reduced to unimportant “taskmasters” within the family, while men hold ultimate authority.

In conclusion, the mother's sacrifices did not bring her fulfillment or reward but instead made her lose meaning in her claimed life. When she is left alone, she realizes that her presence has been replaced by a new generation that does not need her.

“The children never came to visit. Their excuse was always that they were too busy. But the truth was that they did not like the sterile smell that clung to everything in the house.” (Paragraph 17)

The sterile word smell in this sentence can be interpreted as a metaphor for the mother's life that is presently purged, capricious, and without enthusiasm.

b. The Mother's Emotional Dependency on her Role in the Family

This emotional reliance is seen in one of the scenes where the mother is terrified when her children begin to grow up and leave her:

“She awoke with a bad dream when her oldest child, Stjáni, began to pack his suitcase to go out into the world. With uncontrollable vehemence she threw herself over

the threshold to block his exit.”
(Paragraph 14)

The mother's act of physically blocking her children from leaving reflects how women in a patriarchal system have no life outside of their part as mothers. She has built her identity around her role within the family, so when that role begins to decrease, she feels a loss of meaning in life.

Her child reacts in a cold way, which shows how this system also shapes children to require their mother's sacrifices as allowed and not something that should be appreciated:

“A sucking sound could be heard as the boy stepped on her on his way out. He thought she was moaning and paused for a moment and said that she herself was to blame. No one had asked her to lie down there.” (Paragraph 14)

This dialogue reflects how the patriarchal system instructs that women's sacrifices are their own duty and not something that must be honored or appreciated. The child indeed faults his mother for sacrificing so much without considering how this system has conditioned his mother to continuously be in that role.

c. The Final Expendability of the Mother after Her Sacrifices

After spending her whole life with her family, the mother in *A Story for Children* at last faces the unforgiving reality that her role is no longer necessary. Over a long time, she has sacrificed everything for her children, but once they grow up, they do not care about her.

When her children had cleared up and she started to feel disoriented, the mother attempted to get the changes in

herself. She went to the specialist to look for answers to the feeling she was increasingly feeling:

“But gradually she began to feel a heaviness in her chest. It seemed as if her lungs no longer had room enough to function, and after a year had passed, she went to the doctor.”
(Paragraph 12)

The phrase “heaviness in her chest” here has a double meaning. Physically, the mother is experiencing changes in her body due to the loss of her brain, but typically, it reflects the enthusiastic burden of losing her role within the family. Patriarchy has instructed her that her life is as significant as she takes care of her domestic duties and children. Now, without them, she did not know who she was.

When the doctor explained her condition, the mother was relieved that there was finally a scientific explanation for her feelings. However, rather than offering solutions to help her regain control of her life, the doctor rejected her situation as characteristic:

“This was a natural development, lex vitae, if one may say so—and at that, the doctor laughed—there was no need to fear that such a low could be anything but just.”
(Paragraph 12)

The doctor's words reflect how patriarchy normalizes women's suffering. As if her sacrifice could be a normal part of life and not something to be questioned. In other words, the system does not give a way out for women who have lost their roles but expects them to accept it with resignation.

After her visit to the doctor, the mother realized that her part within the family was truly over. Not only had her

children surrendered to her, but indeed her husband did not respect her as important. Their relationship had ended up so foreign that she felt like a guest in her domestic:

“She saw him so seldom lately, and whenever he appeared at home she got up from the chair in a hurry, as if a guest had arrived.” (Paragraph 14)

Here, the mother now does not include a part within the family that she utilized to manage wholeheartedly. The patriarchy had created a role for her but had not given her the space to stay after the role was not required.

Her estrangement comes to its peak when she at last tries to get back the part of herself that she has lost. In desperation, she took her brain that had long been protected in alcohol to a doctor and inquired if it seemed to still be utilized:

“She took the jar down from the shelf, brought it to the doctor and asked if he thought the brain was still usable.” (Paragraph 14)

However, her hopes were unsuccessful. After a long time of being in a system that only required him to give up, she realized that there was no way to return to her ancient self. The doctor refused to allow an authoritative reply, as in the event that her claim to life no longer matters:

“Therefore, it would be debatable whether it would pay to move it at all.” (Paragraph 14)

In the end, the mother realized that there was no result from the sacrifices she had made. Having given everything to her family, she was set free with no reason, no reason, and no clear

place within the lives of the individuals she once lovingly cared for.

5. CONCLUSION

This study shows that the excessiveness of sacrifice enforced by the mother figure in the short story "A Story for Children" of self-denial is a result of conventional patriarchal standards, and they can be criticized sensibly and rationally from the viewpoint of Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory of existence. It is a record of the manner in which social aims and domestic necessities devalue the character of the mother and force her to give up her whole life for her family. The story continues to reveal how the patriarchal society idealizes the woman as a nurturer who has to offer herself as a sacrifice. After her children do not need the mother anymore, she is treated like garbage when she can no longer serve their interests. This sacrifice, from the feminist perspective, is not a sacrificial dedication but a result of systemic oppression that deprives women of their claims, opportunities, and lives.

Beauvoir argues that throughout history, women have been created as the 'Other' of men and have no freedom. Men have been prioritized in all activities, while women have been restricted and used for the benefit of men. A patriarchal society is built in such a way as to make women secondary and ignore their will. Beauvoir also argues that the female body is dedicated to the role of wife and mother, and this is the most important role for women in a patriarchal society (Zarrinjooee & Kalantarian, 2017). Therefore, when these two roles are completed, she will truly feel regret for having lost her own well-being.

The part of the mother in this story uncovers how the patriarchal framework ties and keeps up the standard that

women ought to prioritize their families at the expense of their right to closeness and needs as individuals. When her children are developed and do not require her, she can be a surrendered woman. This would propose that the system, as it were, not abuse women inside parts of the mother but, moreover, arrange them when they are not valuable.

The researcher provides some suggestions that are expected to be useful for readers through this research. The study of English literature, and especially the analysis of short stories, can be one way to reflect social realities that are not observed, for example, issues of gender inequality and the role of women in the family. This study illustrates that excessive sacrifice of women is disguised with a noble image, when in fact it is oppression justified by patriarchal standards.

Through the approach of feminist framework, particularly Simone de Beauvoir's theory, readers are anticipated to be more analytical in seeing the development of women's roles and characters by social pressures. This research is anticipated to supply modern bits of knowledge for students, analysts, and general readers who are curious about conducting scholarly considerations from a gender and feminist perspective.

The researcher, moreover, concluded that readers, particularly women, are more engaged to address the social roles that have been given to them and do not continuously consider sacrifice as an evident commitment. Literature can be a powerful educational device for understanding the flow of control, oppression, and women's resistance within the setting of daily life. At last, the researcher hopes that this study can clear the way for assisting investigations to analyze more literary works utilizing other feminist theoretical

systems, as well as raise basic awareness in reading and understanding the representation of women in literary works.

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