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Patriarchal Society is just a Drag

running for the shelter of a mother's little helper

"Her speeches were about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home. Serena Joy didn't do this herself, she made speeches instead, but she presented this failure of hers as a sacrifice she was making for the good of all...She doesn't make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she has been taken at her word."

--- Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

As the above quote shows, women living in patriarchal societies are forced to stay at home, and are clearly being oppressed. A patriarchy is defined by Merriam-Webster as "[a] social system in which the father is the head of the family and men have authority over women and children." While the definition is neutral, feminist authors have an extremely negative view about the patriarchy. They believe that it is hindering and preventing "women from realizing their productive and creative possibilities." (Handout) Virginia Woolf, one of the pioneers in feminist writing said she wrote her books from "within... a 'patriarchal' society" and that her goal was to expose the negative aspects of this society. (Handout) Feminist authors staunchly believe that we live in a patriarchal society and that this society is relegating women to the status of second-class citizens. They express this view by showing the negative way that society treats women. Society believes that all women should be either domestic slaves or submissive sex objects, and occasionally both. It is clear that West's *Return of the Soldier*, Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Winterson's *Oranges are not the only Fruit* are written with this feminist agenda in mind, they intend to express the struggle of their female characters against the patriarchal society.

In *Return of the Soldier*, Kitty is presented as the perfect example of an ideal woman under a patriarchal system. Kitty has no personality or opinions of her own and

while her husband is away at the war, she waits patiently at home, pining for him. She is artificial and is described as a woman who "looked so like a girl on a magazine cover that one expected to find a large '7d'" (West 4). Kitty's position as an ideal patriarchal woman is clear because she is beautiful, obedient, alert and excellent for child bearing. (23) She is also clueless about her husband's amnesia; she thinks he is an unfaithful husband, simply pretending so that he can have an affair. Kitty never experiences any growth in the story and remains a slave to the patriarchy.

Jenny, on the other hand is a transitive character in *Return of the Soldier*. At first, Jenny is an extremely patriarchal woman. She has an almost godlike worship of her cousin Chris, the master of the house. Her descriptions glow with platitudes, practically creating love poems to this man with "hair... of two colors, brown and gold" (2). However, when Chris returns home with amnesia and his long lost love Margaret arrives, her divination of her master ceases. Chris returns in shambles, his hair of two colors has become "hair... of three colours now—brown and gold and sliver" (18). Jenny begins to worship Margaret because of how her unrepressed love has helped Chris to become happier than he has ever been. Margaret is a liberated woman who is willing to sacrifice her entire life for one more chance at love. This unbridled femininity inspires Jenny to throw off the yokes of patriarchy and she betrays Kitty to begin helping Margaret. Jenny continues to defy society when she has a brief lesbian experience with Margaret, "[w]e kissed, not as women, but as lovers do." (66) However, despite Jenny's attempts to defy society, she is never able to accept her true feelings and make the leap to lesbianism. She is stuck between feminine freedom and patriarchal slavery. The patriarchal society will never allow her to be happy, and eventually it will take her life.

Margaret's life is nothing less than a Shakespearian tragedy and it is in Margaret that West expresses her ultimate anti-patriarchal vision. Because of miscommunications, Margaret's ideal romance with Chris was destroyed. However, failures in the past have not jaded Margaret's outlook on life. When Chris returns from the war with amnesia and she is given a second chance, she is willing to give up everything, for love. Through her willingness to embrace love, Margaret becomes rejuvenated, she is described as "different now; she had a little smile in her eyes as though she were listening to a familiar air played far away." (47) However, her newfound joy is short lived. Her romance with Chris is forced to an end by Kitty. She uses guilt to force Margaret to awaken Chris and return him to normal. This guilt destroys Margaret's strident feminism, because she values the memory of the dead child more than her own happiness. Margaret's sacrifice dooms her to a life without love.

In Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, the main character Mrs. Ramsey is happily married to her husband, but there is something missing from her life. She is an excellent patriarchal woman and is respected for her kindness and tolerance. Moreover, like a good mother, her first priority is to protect her children, not just physically, but also psychologically. In the first section "The Window", her son James is intent on going to the Lighthouse. The weather is looking bad and it is clear that James should not go, because it would be unsafe. Mrs. Ramsey is aware of this, but she manages to give him hope, as not to crush his dream of seeing the lighthouse. She is able to protect her son from danger while being careful not to crush his fragile ego. Mrs. Ramsey is also a fair mother, when Prue and Andrew are fighting over the placement of the skull in their bedroom, Mrs. Ramsey is able to reach a middle ground by covering up the skull (masculine) with her shawl (feminine). Her ability to rise above gender to resolve disputes shows what an incredible woman she is. She is also skilled at taking care of day-

to-day things such as cooking, cleaning and raising children, leaving the men free to run the world, which is the ultimate goal of any patriarchal woman.

However, at the end of the section, Mrs. Ramsey is unable to tell her husband that she loves him. This is because Mrs. Ramsey is an empty person inside. She performs her feminine tasks perfectly but they have not brought her any sense of self or accomplishment. This is what happens to intelligent women under a patriarchal society. The author clearly wrote Mrs. Ramsey with this goal in mind. Mrs. Ramsey's husband is a minor author and a college professor, but he feels that all of his creativity comes from Mrs. Ramsey. Alas, Mrs. Ramsey is not allowed to create anything except harmony in the household and fine young children. She is like Prometheus, bound to a rock, powerless. Her rock is the chores of the household and the raising of the children. Imagine what Mrs. Ramsey could be doing if she was free, imagine her creativity unbound. The powerful influence of Mrs. Ramsey is clear in the section titled "To the Lighthouse". The family has lost Mrs. Ramsey and it is falling apart. The children have almost no connection to their father, they see him as a stranger. Even Lilly feels the loss of Mrs. Ramsey. In fact, it is the loss of Mrs. Ramsey that causes Lilly to begin painting again, and leads her to create what we are to believe is her masterpiece.

Lilly is the antithesis to Mrs. Ramsey, she is Prometheus unbound. She has freed herself from the chains of the patriarchy that hold Mrs. Ramsey and is following her dream to become an artist. However, at the beginning of the book she is not completely free from the influence of the patriarchal society. She worries about the fate of her work, she wonders if it will be stored in an attic or underneath a couch. This self-doubt hurts her and causes her work to be weakened. Lilly is further rattled by Mr. Tansley's comment that "women can't paint or write". It is clear that until she fully develops her ability to stand up against the patriarchal society, she will be crushed under the weight of its criticism. However, in the area of marriage and family life, she is able to maintain her status as an independent woman with her only mate being her art. Throughout the

novel, Lilly transforms and becomes a completely independent woman. By the end, she is no longer hindered by the criticism of male society. She begins to work on a painting that is a masterpiece. It is clear that through Lilly, Woolf is projecting her own goals for society. She believes that women should be free from patriarchal control. It will not be an easy process however, women will have to work at it, but with diligence, they should be able to develop into mature independent women like Lilly Briscoe. Lilly is the character in the novel that directly represents Woolf. Lilly is an artist, trying to be free of patriarchal society, so is Woolf.

Jeanette, who is based on the author of the novel *Oranges are not the only fruit* is also oppressed by the patriarchal society. Jeanette is dominated by the religious influence of her mother. She is raised to be a preacher/missionary and is fully versed in bible trivia. Jeanette is a very good “missionary in training” for her church. She supports her church and seems to provide a strength that they are desperately lacking. With her strength, they are able to split from the Salvation Army Band and begin caroling on their own. She also has great compassion for all, which is an extremely admirable quality that all people, and especially religious people should seek to emulate. However there is one “flaw” in Jeanette’s character, she is a lesbian. This “flaw” causes her entire world to be turned upside down. The church turns against her; they have zero tolerance for her sexuality. They starve her in an attempt make her realize the “errors” of her ways. They ostracize her and separate her from her lover. When torture proves to be only a temporary solution, the church forces her mother to disown her. The church leaders even consider that it was because they allowed her to preach that she became a lesbian. The society is clearly patriarchal and their oppression of Jeanette is as plain as day. Their view seems to be that if they give any freedom or education to a woman she will become a lesbian and attempt to take on the male role in society. The society regrets giving a little bit of power to a woman and wants to put her back in her cell, where she belongs. In the end,

Jeanette accepts her sexuality, but is forced to leave her mother and the church, simply to be herself.

Winterson presents a direct opposite to Jeanette in the character of her mother. Her mother is wholly dominated by the patriarchal society. This domination is so thorough that Winterson never even gives Jeanette's mother a name, other than "Jeanette's mother". She is completely defined by her position as a mother and a member of the church. Jeanette's mother is very religious and seems to be fighting a crusade against the world. Every week her and Jeanette mark on the map the actions of the missionaries around the world. It is clear that she wishes that she could be out there fighting the good fight against the heathens, but she is trapped by the patriarchal society. Society would not allow her to be a missionary when she was young, and now she is forever bound by familial responsibility. In this way, Jeanette's mother has been fully conquered by the patriarchal society. They have ruined her dreams and all she can do is pass them on to her adopted daughter and attempt to live vicariously through her. She is also forced to disown her daughter because of society's reaction to Jeanette's lesbianism. There is a possibility that Jeanette's mother went through a lesbian phase in her youth. When she shows Jeanette her photo album, there is a picture of a woman on her "old flames" page. However this lesbian period has been heavily repressed by Jeanette's mother, and the next time Jeanette looks at the photo album, the woman's picture has been removed. Jeanette's mother is a perfect example of a woman oppressed by the patriarchal society.

The struggle of women against the patriarchal society is far from an end. Even in the modern liberal society of today, women are oppressed and held back by society. Fortunately, authors like West, Woolf and Winterson have the nobility of purpose to take on the patriarchal society and try to change things for the better. Only when women confront patriarchal society and become themselves, will they truly be happy. As Betty

Freidan said in the *Feminine Mystique*, "When I stopped conforming to the conventional picture of femininity I finally began to enjoy being a woman."

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