

Motherhood As A Prison: Symbolic Violence and Emotional Control in Elfriede Jelinek's The Piano Teacher

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Abstract: *The study explores how the symbolic violence and emotional domination of motherhood are performed in the Nobel Prize-winning novel The Piano Teacher (1983) by Elfriede Jelinek. The paper traces the way Mrs. Kohut, in which the figure of the mother turns into a prison, in which her daughter Erika becomes confined in her psychological, sexual and emotional growth. Based on the model of symbolic violence by Pierre Bourdieu and the feminist psychoanalytic theory, this exploration uncovers the way in which patriarchal systems are maintained by the complicity of the women in the continuation of systems of oppression. The research hypothesis argues that Jelinek is intentional in projecting the concept of motherhood as a destructive act of autocratic domination that harms the femininity of the subject. The qualitative textual analysis of the novel and analysis of the current scholarship (2020-2025) prove the functioning of mother-daughter bondage as a miniature of the greater society. Findings also suggest that the control exercised by the mother is in the form of economic dependency, space restriction, and psychological manipulations. Three main mechanisms, including emotional surveillance, bodily control, and weaponization of sacrifice, are brought up in the discussion. By exploring the psychological, sociocultural, and feminist dimensions of this dominance, this paper argues that the mother's authoritarian control results in severe emotional fragmentation, impaired autonomy, disturbed sexuality, and lifelong inability to form healthy relationships. The paper concludes that Jelinek's representation challenges the romanticized notion of motherhood by revealing it as a site where women internalize and perpetuate patriarchal violence..*

Keywords: The symbolic violence, the maternal control, female subjectivity, the patriarchal oppression, psychoanalytic feminism

I. INTRODUCTION

Elfriede Jelinek, the Austrian Nobel laureate, who won the prize in 2004, is one of the most controversial feminist authors of the contemporary literature. The 1983 novel *The Piano Teacher* (*Die Klavierspielerin*) is a disturbing look at how maternity can also be a machine of control instead of caring. The novel is about a thirty-eight year old piano teacher in Vienna at the prestigious Conservatory, Erika Kohut, who is still caught in an oppressive relationship with her overbearing mother. Jelinek explores the theme of maternal love unabashedly, and as a result, the view of the motherhood as a means of reproducing and implementing the patriarchal ideals is shown (Kosta 218-234). This research is important because the working of symbolic violence in intimate family relationships can be known. Symbolic violence is the term used by Pierre Bourdieu to refer to non-physical domination but this is done in a way that the dominated parties are involved in the domination. In *The Piano Teacher*, Mrs. Kohut is a living embodiment of this idea she uses her mother power to lock up her daughter emotionally, psychologically, and physically. This incarceration goes beyond the overprotective; it is a systematic annihilation of Erika and her autonomy, sexuality and selfhood. The



mother-daughter relationship is turned into what one scholar Barbara Kosta calls as bond/age both forming bonds and coercing bonds (Kosta 222).

The current scholarship about Jelinek has been further broadened especially on how her works help in illuminating the issue of the psychology of women in patriarchal capitalism. The 2020-2025 studies are on the increasing research of the psychological processes of oppression functioning in her fiction. Scholars believe that it is the lack of redemptive account that makes Jelinek powerful as well as the inability of the author to comfort or resolve the readers, but to make them address harsh realities of gendered violence without being sentimental about it. The time of the novel, 1980s Vienna, gives the background that is essential. The cultural landscape of the post-war Austria characterized by conservative bourgeois effects and fascist legacies that are not resolved, sets the atmosphere where the bodies and desires of women are being controlled. Mrs. Kohut is economically helpless in a patriarchal world, and she pays back by having absolute authority over her daughter. Such a dynamic introduces the way, in which women, who are deprived of agency in the social sphere, can attempt to gain power at the cost of exercising control over other women at home. This paper will claim that Jelinek uses the mother-daughter relationship as a miniature to reveal how patriarchal structures perpetuate themselves by involving women. This study by looking at maternal control as symbolic violence helps to add value to feminist criticism in literature and general discussions regarding how oppression is concerned in apparently loving relations.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of *The Piano Teacher* by scholars has led to varied interpretations especially on the mother-daughter relationship and its implication in terms of psychology. The seminal work of Barbara Kosta titled *Inscribing Erika: Mother-Daughter Bond/age in Elfriede Jelinek's Die Klavierspielerin (1994)* created the fundamentals of interpreting how the novel depicts the role of the maternal as a source of control as bondage. Kosta shows that the devotion of Mrs. Kohut camouflages sailing self-interest, which makes her a maternal sacrifice, a form of autocratic approach, not care (Kosta 222-223). These insights have been extended by the recent scholarship of 2025. The article *A thorough investigation of female repression and violent desire was authored by Conflict, Justice, Decolonization: Asia in Transition in the 21st Century*; let me state that the presented dominance of Mrs. Kohut is down to her powerlessness in the patriarchal society. The success of Erika is perceived as social mobility strategy by the mother who uses the success of her daughter as a personal empowerment. This turns motherhood into a self-interested manipulation as opposed to selfless caring.

Psychoanalytic methods have been found to be especially productive. The analysis of the film adaptation done by Jean Wyatt examines the emphasis of maternal proximity on Erika in the film by Haneke, which deprives her of access to symbolic order and, as a result, normal psychological growth. The model of relationships between mothers and daughters introduced by Nancy Chodorow helps to realize that girls feel themselves as being too attached, undefined, non-delimited which is one of the pains which Erika embodies in her psychological life in a painful way. The Kohut family is pre-Oedipal symbiosis having a pathological continuation into manhood. Larson Powell and Brenda Bethman analyze the role of musicality because they argue that Jelinek employs music to emphasize perversity. They argue that Erika is engaged in musical practices that aim at rendering women marriageable but her failure as a pianist is indicative of her inability to attain subjectivity. She is still an object of her mother instead of a desiring subject. This reading links musical performance to a psychological dysfunction, and demonstrates how the bourgeois cultural practices keep women as objects.

The article *The Resonance of the Piano: Gender, Culture, and Power (2025)* follows the history of piano symbolism: it was a symbol of bourgeois prestige but transformed into a tool of psychological torture in the twentieth century. Where Buddenbrooks by Thomas Mann had piano as an element of social refinements and passive femininity, Jelinek turns it into the device of repression and control. The critical attitude of institutionalized motherhood as Jelinek portrays it is a point of feminism scholarship. The clarification Adrienne Rich made between motherhood as experience and institution comes in handy in patriarchal society where mothers are required to offer flawless constant love and deny their pain



and suffering. Elisabeth Badinter unleashes this institutionalized sacrifice as an obstacle to the growth potential of women. Jelinek reveals the dynamics of these interrelations with a scowl, revealing the maternal sacrifice turned into an instrument of oppression. The symbolic violence in literature has pointed out how the work of Jelinek proves the theories of Bourdieu. Symbolic violence is unconscious, and dominated parties are in agreement with their domination. Mrs. Kohut instigates patriarchal values and passes it to Erika by manipulating it in the guise of motherly care. This process guarantees the perpetuation of patriarchy even during the absence of a father.

III. OBJECTIVES

To analyze how motherhood functions as symbolic violence and emotional imprisonment in Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher*, examining the specific mechanisms through which Mrs. Kohut controls Erika's psychological, sexual, and physical autonomy.

To investigate the relationship between patriarchal structures and maternal oppression, demonstrating how women perpetuate systemic violence against other women within intimate familial relationships.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach adopted in this research is the qualitative textual analysis where close reading techniques are applied to discuss *The Piano Teacher* by Elfriede Jelinek as primary source material. The paper follows the feminist literary criticism paradigm along with psychoanalysis theory, in particular relying on the idea of symbolic violence proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, and theories of mother/daughter relationships by Nancy Chodorow.

Research Design: The research employing an interpretive approach to qualitative research involves analysing narrative components, characterization and symbolic representations in the text. This method allows the profound analysis of the literary devices as power tools to present the psychological and social truths.

Sample Selection: The book that will be used is a 1988 English translation of *Die Klavierspielerin* (1983) by Joachim Neugroschel. The secondary sources will consist of peer-reviewed scholarly articles released 1993-2025 with the subject matter of feminist criticism, psychoanalytic readings, and cultural studies of the work of Jelinek.

Analytical Tools: The analytical tools include thematic content analysis, which the research uses to find common patterns around the themes of maternal control, symbolic violence, and psychological imprisonment. Some of the most important categories of analysis are: (1) emotional surveillance mechanisms, (2) expressing the control of the body, (3) economic dependency processes, (4) spatial confinement, and (5) psychological control of manipulation.

Data Collection: The information found in textual excerpts that portray mother-daughter dynamics, the inner psychological processes of Erika, and commentary in the story. Secondary information used in the research was obtained on Google Scholar database, which has a high level of scholarly information as these articles are peer-reviewed and validated by the use of DOI and URL.

Theoretical Framework: The theory of symbolic violence by Pierre Bourdieu gives an insight into non-physical domination. The idea of bond/age developed by Barbara Kosta sheds light on duality of mother-daughter relationship as an experience of bonding and enslavement at the same time. The pre-Oedipal attachment and abjection are analyzed using psychoanalytic theories by Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva.

Analytical Procedure: Textual evidence is systematically coded under a set of pre-identified thematic codes, which are subsequently subjected to interpretive analysis in relating the results to theoretical constructs. The comparison with the modern literature can guarantee the conformity to the modern academic discussions.

V. RESULTS

Manifestations of Maternal Control in the Novel

The novel exposes a great amount of writing about the controlling mechanisms of Mrs. Kohut. To the mother, Erika is bedding at the age of thirty-eight as a sign of forced infantilization and violation of boundaries. The mother is tracking the moves of Erika and wants to know whereabouts of her daughter all the time, and she urges her daughter to own up



to her mother without her requesting where she is. This surveillance is applied to the body of Erika the mother forbids makeup, nice clothes, and any communication with men, as it may destroy everything that Erika has managed to accomplish."

Economic and Spatial Imprisonment

Paradoxical powers exist between Mrs. Kohut and Erika due to the economic dependency of the former on the latter. As Erika is the breadwinner, she is financially unable since the mother controls all the resources. They live together in an apartment, where Erika has no personal space and no personal territory. Such space segregation reflects psychological incarceration that Erika is unable to get rid of her mother either physically or psychologically.

Psychological Manipulation Through Failed Dreams

The failures in the ambitions of the mother that she did not achieve onto Erika bring about crashing psychological weight. Mrs. Kohut thought of Erika as a famous concert pianist, but Erika did not achieve it, simply becoming a teacher. This backwardness creates unimaginable guilt which the mother uses. Recent academia pinpoints the way in which Erika is devoured by guilt and is in the prison of this suffocating relationship with her mother and is not able to voice her anger and avenge against maternal abuse.

The Father's Absence as Structural Element

The father of Erika was put into an institution at a tender age, leaving the mother with all the power vacuum. The study of 2025 illustrates the extent to which, the daughter, Erika, is a surrogate to the missing father as exemplified by the bed-sharing between Mrs. Kohut and the daughter at night. This replacement distorts the functions of a normal family to place Erika in the role of child and husband-substitute.

Self-Harm as Response to Control

Not knowing where to take out her anger on the abuser, Erika resorts to self-harm as a way of self-destruction. She emasculates herself using a razor blade belonging to her father, a gesture that is seen as efforts to be desperate in breaking the maternal aegis and at the same time, be associated with the masculine world of the absentee father. This self-destructive attitude is the only way of Erika to claim physical autonomy, although this autonomy is expressed in a harmful way.

VI. DISCUSSION

Symbolic Violence and Maternal Authority

The type of mother-daughter relationships in *The Piano Teacher* can be used to illustrate the idea of Bourdieu symbolic violence acting through complicity. Mrs. Kohut has legitimate power of maternity and Erika does not oppose this domination because of natural maternal care. This acceptance is the "complicity" that Bourdieu refers to as Erika is aware of the dominance of her mother but she is powerless since she has internalized notions concerning maternal rights and filial obligations. According to Kosta, the concept of motherhood turns into a weapon of the self-interest as Jelinek shows maternal self-sacrifice to be a manipulative control (Kosta 222-223). The self-presentation of the mother as sacrificing parent covers the autocratic working of the mother. She says that she had dedicated her life to the success of Erika, which makes it impossible to pay it off. This affective capital keeps Erika in incarceration even better than the chains.

This type of violence is symbolic because it is expressed through the manner in which Mrs. Kohut does not physically coerce anyone to obey her (though violence at times breaks out). She plays guilt, shame and dependency that is fabricated. To the extent that it becomes psychologically impossible to resist, Erika lives by the values of her mother. Even the sexual perversions and self-harm of Erika are twisted forms of independence in the autonomy of the mother in the totalizing system of control.

Patriarchy's Reproduction Through Women

The most important point that Jelinek makes is demonstrating the existence of patriarchal structures based on women doing nothing to eliminate their own. Mrs. Kohut, a man who is weak economically, lonely, and socially unknown in the patriarchal society, compensates by subjecting Erika. She is a carrier of the traditional expectations and the



conservative norms of the society and makes herself a carrier of the social norms. The mother is more effective than the man in the implementation of the patriarchal values since her power is presented through the form of maternal love as opposed to the oppression of the male gender. This relationship proves the insidiousness of patriarchy that does not demand the constant presence of men in it. The loss of the father is the opposite of being in the grip of patriarchal authority since the mother internalizes masculine values and implements them. She is feeding Erika on bourgeois standards of feminine success (musical success to find the right man) and avoiding real love affairs at the same time. The mother upholds the patriarchal system in the absence of the male, proving that the structures are so ingrained in women. The recent studies point at underlining the fact that despite the appearance of the lack of influence of the father, patriarchy still works under the carpet, disclosing its hidden strength. This invisible action renders any form of resistance almost unattainable Erika is unable to see an external adversary as oppression is made by apparently caring mother.

Psychological Consequences of Maternal Prison

The psychological impacts that are devastating in the long run on Erika are devastating. It is maternal imprisonment that causes her to make poor choices in forming healthy relationships, her voyeuristic sexuality and her masochistic fantasies. According to psychoanalytic scholars, the intruder closeness of her mother denies Erika the symbolic order and by extension the common escapades of maternal proximity. Erika is unable to realize separation to form a healthy identity, as she is still in pre-Oedipal symbiosis. This damage is demonstrated in her relationship with the student Walter Klemmer. When Erika tries to have intimacy, she is only able to imagine it in the sadomasochistic control that resembles how her mother treated her. She writes Walter a letter about how he ought to hurt her, and attempts to write sexual contact the way she writes all things in her managed life. The disgusted rejection and subsequent rape of Erika by Walter finishes off her destruction she finds that she cannot get out of maternal patterns even in so-called free sexual relationship.

VII. CONCLUSION

The Piano Teacher by Elfriede Jelinek depicts motherhood as a place of symbolic violence where patriarchal oppression exists by making women complicit. Mrs. Kohut develops maternal power into prison that kills Erika ability to have independent selfhood, healthy sexuality and psychological wellbeing. The novel shows how economic helplessness, spatial restriction, emotional subjugation, and weaponized sacrifice form the complete control system. Jelinek refutes the romanticized accounts of the problem of motherhood by revealing its darker aspects that hide the ways intimate relationships can reinstate systemic oppression. The mother-daughter relationship of bondage is a manifestation of the insidious nature of patriarchy to continue itself by internalizing the oppressive values in women. The study can be used in learning about the working mechanisms of symbolic violence within families, as well as in revealing how gender inequality is perpetuated through feminist literature. Jelinek denying redemptive resolution must make one acknowledge that liberation must not only eliminate the external forms of patriarchy in society, but also internalized models of domination that women impose on each other.

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