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Literary Theories

Patriarchal Bargains and the Constraints on Women's Self-Realization in the Novels of Edith Wharton

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Abstract: The concept of patriarchal bargains, introduced by Deniz Kandiyoti, provides a critical framework to understand how women negotiate power within restrictive gender systems. This paper examines how such bargains, while offering limited social security and acceptance, ultimately restrict women's exploration of identity and self-realization in the novels of Edith Wharton. Through an analysis of *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *The Custom of the Country*, the study argues that Wharton's female characters are confined within socially sanctioned roles that inhibit authentic selfhood. Their attempts to navigate patriarchal expectations reveal the illusion of choice within a rigid system, where compliance, resistance, or manipulation all lead to compromised identities.

Keywords: Patriarchal Bargain, Self-Realization, Gender Roles, Edith Wharton, Feminist Theory.



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Introduction

Women's search for identity and self-realization has historically been shaped by rigid patriarchal structures that define and limit female agency. Deniz Kandiyoti conceptualizes this condition as a "patriarchal bargain," where women strategize within constraints rather than outside them. As Kandiyoti notes, women "accommodate and resist within a set of concrete constraints" (Kandiyoti 274). In the novels of Edith Wharton, this negotiation becomes central to female experience. Her characters inhabit elite social environments where identity is socially constructed and tightly regulated. This paper argues that patriarchal bargains, while appearing to offer agency, ultimately limit women's exploration and self-realization by confining them within socially acceptable roles.

Patriarchal Bargains as Structured Constraints

Patriarchal bargains operate within fixed boundaries that restrict genuine autonomy. Women may appear to exercise choice, but these choices are conditioned by societal expectations. Kandiyoti emphasizes that such bargains are not acts of freedom but "strategies for survival" within patriarchal systems (274). This limitation is evident in Wharton's fiction, where female characters internalize societal norms and regulate their behavior accordingly. Their identities are shaped not by inner desires but by external pressures, thereby restricting their ability to explore alternative possibilities of selfhood.

The Tragic Limitation of Exploration in *The House of Mirth*

In *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart represents the conflict between personal desire and social expectation. She seeks both emotional fulfillment and financial security but is unable to reconcile the two. As Wharton observes, Lily is "so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her" (Wharton, *House of Mirth* 5). Lily's patriarchal bargain fails because she resists full submission to the system. She refuses to marry purely for wealth, yet lacks the means to survive independently. Her partial compliance leads to social exclusion, demonstrating that patriarchal systems allow little room for negotiation. Ultimately, Lily's inability to fully conform or fully resist results in her tragic downfall, denying her any meaningful self-realization.

Conformity and the Illusion of Stability in The Age of Innocence

In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton contrasts May Welland and Ellen Olenska to illustrate different responses to patriarchal constraints. May embodies complete conformity, aligning herself entirely with societal expectations. Her success lies in her ability to maintain appearances and uphold social norms. Ellen Olenska, however, challenges these norms by seeking independence and emotional authenticity. Her desire for divorce and personal freedom positions her as an outsider. As Wharton writes, “She had the face of a woman to whom nothing was left to fear” (Wharton, *Age of Innocence* 68), suggesting both her courage and her marginalization.

Despite her strength, Ellen is ultimately forced to withdraw, highlighting the cost of resistance. May’s compliance ensures stability but suppresses individuality, while Ellen’s resistance leads to isolation. Both outcomes reveal the limitations imposed on women’s exploration of identity.

Manipulation Without Self-Realization in The Custom of the Country

Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country* represents a more calculated engagement with patriarchal structures. She fully embraces the system, using marriage as a tool for social advancement. Unlike Lily or Ellen, Undine does not resist or question the system; instead, she exploits it. However, her success is superficial. As Wharton notes, Undine “was never satisfied” (Wharton, *Custom of the Country* 289). Her constant pursuit of wealth and status reflects a lack of inner fulfillment. While she achieves material success, she fails to attain genuine self-realization, as her identity remains dependent on external validation.

The Limits of Agency and the Illusion of Choice

Across Wharton’s novels, women appear to exercise agency, yet their choices are constrained by societal expectations. The options available to them—compliance, resistance, or manipulation—are all shaped by patriarchal structures. This creates an illusion of choice, where women seem empowered but remain confined. The psychological consequences of these constraints are evident in the dissatisfaction and internal conflict experienced by Wharton’s characters. Their inability to reconcile personal desires with societal expectations underscores the limitations of patriarchal bargains as a pathway to self-realization.

Conclusion

Patriarchal bargains in the novels of Edith Wharton ultimately limit women's exploration and self-realization. While these bargains may provide temporary security or status, they confine women within restrictive roles that inhibit authentic identity formation. Wharton's female characters, whether compliant, resistant, or strategic, remain bound by a system that prioritizes social order over individual freedom. Through her nuanced portrayal of women's struggles, Wharton reveals that true self-realization cannot be achieved within the confines of patriarchal structures. Instead, it requires a transformation of the system itself, beyond negotiation and compromise.

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