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University of Saida, Dr. Moulay Tahar  
Faculty of Letters, Languages and Arts  
Department of English Language and Literature



## Psychological Trauma and Women's Oppression in Ira Levin's The Stepford Wives

Dissertation submitted to the Department of English as partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master's in Literature and Civilization

**Presented by :**

Ms. Nourhane Benattou

**Supervised by :**

Dr. Marouane Messaoudi

### Board of Examiners:

Dr. Marouane Messaoudi

(MCB) supervisor

University of Saida

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### **Declaration of originality**

I hereby declare that the work presented in my dissertation headed " Psychological Trauma and Women's Oppression in Ira Levin's The Stepford Wives 1972 ", is my own original work and the result of my independent research. This dissertation includes no material previously published or written by another person, nor material that has been accepted for the qualification of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution.

Date:

Name: Benattou Nourhane

Signature:

## **Dedication**

Praise be to God, who gifted me the light of knowledge and lit the path of my search  
with wisdom and grace.

To my beloved mother, whose prayers were the rain that nourished my days, who  
sowed patience in my heart and the love of labor, you are the silent rhythm behind  
each stride I take.

To my wise father, who carved wisdom into my soul, who taught me that the journey  
to triumph begins with a spark of will, your strength lives in every page I've turned.

To my cherished sisters, fellow travelers on the winding road, whose love steadied  
me in every storm, you were the echo of hope in my darkest hours.

To my dearest friend Ikram, more sister than companion, my refuge when the world  
grew heavy, the keeper of dreams and secrets, thank you for being the steady flame  
when all else flickered.

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lingers in the margins of my journey.

And to myself, who bore the weight of fatigue yet kept walking, who clung to the edge  
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for not giving up,

for daring to finish,

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation investigates the linked themes of psychological trauma and women's oppression in Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* (1972). Through the framework of psychological trauma and feminist ideals, this study studies how Levin undermines societal norms and explores the psychological effects of a patriarchal culture on women's identities. Set in an idyllic suburban village, the novel reveals the underlying battle of women who, under male-dominated society norms, are changed into docile characters, losing their originality and autonomy. The study begins with a careful assessment of psychological trauma, its varieties, and its symptoms, particularly among women. Drawing on psychoanalytic and cognitive-behavioral theories as well as trauma-informed treatment techniques, the research evaluates how trauma influence identity, agency, and behavior, with a particular focus on gender-specific responses to trauma. A historical investigation of trauma in literature offers foundation for how psychological distress has traditionally been depicted, creating a framework for comprehending Levin's depiction of mental deterioration in the context of societal restrictions. The focus then switches to the problem of women's oppression, covering its historical roots and progress via important feminist movements. By studying patriarchal institutions, gender roles, and the history of feminist thought—from first-wave suffrage to third-wave intersectionality—the dissertation reveals the ways in which gender stereotypes and cultural conditioning perpetuate women's marginalization. The research is developed by studying numerous feminist ideas, including Marxist, radical, and postmodern feminism, each presenting a specific critique of social expectations and the structural oppression of women. The principal research centers on *The Stepford Wives* as a satirical picture of the mental repercussions of tyranny. Through the persona of Joanna Eberhart, the study investigates how oppressive gender standards materialize as psychological trauma, ultimately weakening her sense of self. The *Stepford wives'* transition into subservient figures is analyzed as a metaphor for dehumanization, control, and the destruction of individuality, where patriarchal standards dictate women's tasks. This portion also discusses Joanna's psychological coping mechanisms, oscillating between resistance and acceptance, as she grapples with the impulse to conform. The novel's symbolism and narrative choices underscore the

intricate relationship between psychological trauma and societal oppression, showing how patriarchal institutions push women to either comply or risk losing their uniqueness. By exploring the combination of trauma and oppression, this study claims that *The Stepford Wives* presents a forceful condemnation of the psychological ramifications of gender-based captivity, expressing both a personal and societal resistance. Through a comprehensive description of pain and rehabilitation, Levin's book advocates a rethink of the impacts of societal conditioning, stressing the need to tackle restrictive systems that impair women's autonomy and mental well-being.

**Keywords:** Psychological trauma, Women's oppression, Patriarchal culture, Gender stereotypes, Identity erosion

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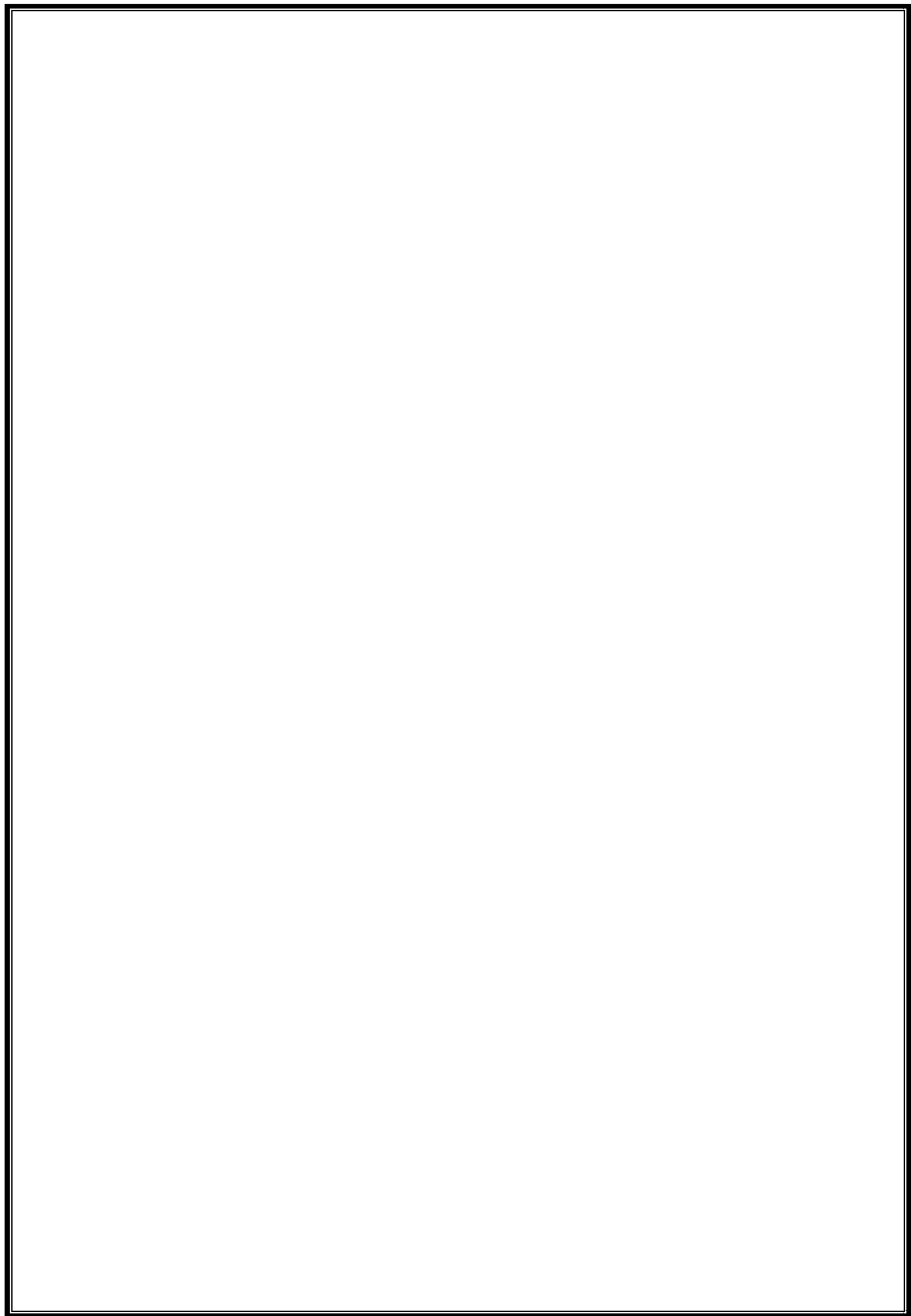
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# **General Introduction**



Psychological trauma, is not solely a medical issue, it is a complex phenomenon grounded in personal history and the societal forces that govern human life. Trauma in women arises not only from recognizable, identifiable incidents but from the enduring and institutionalized modes of systematic discrimination and social subjugation. This encompasses structural violence against women, the confinement of women to domestic roles, and the continual marginalization of women's autonomy and unique identities by patriarchal norms. This thesis seeks to investigate the intricate between women's psychological trauma and women's oppression by anchoring its examination in the intersecting paradigms of psychological and feminist theories and employing these frameworks to a critical interpretation of Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives*, a novel that effectively exposes the psychological damage and symbolic violence imposed on women patriarchal structures.

This thesis is structured into three comprehensive chapters; each one incrementally expands upon the integrative base laid by the prior section. The first chapter offers the essential theoretical framework by charting the historical trajectory of psychological trauma as a concept. Starting with a historical review of psychology's beginnings, the chapter follows the discipline's transition from philosophical origins to its development as a science anchored in empirical research. The redefinition of psychology not only revolutionized the study of the human psyche but also made way for trauma studies to emerge as an important domain of scholarly research. At the heart of this chapter lies an exploration of three pivotal figures whose work has substantially formed the conceptual framework of trauma: Sigmund Freud, Pierre Janet, and Bessel van der Kolk.

The second chapter broadens the scope of the thesis by interpreting trauma as a phenomenon shaped by the sociopolitical realities of women's oppression. a nuanced grasp of psychological trauma necessitates confronting the societal mechanisms that disproportionately position women under enduring harm. This chapter thus draws on feminist theory to deconstruct the mechanisms of women's subjugation and examine the ways in which these dynamics manifest in both overt and subtle forms of trauma. It opens by providing a foundational conceptualization of women's oppression, followed

by an examination of its most common manifestations, notably patriarchy, objectification, and the rigid assignment of gender roles. The chapter proceeds by tracing the progression of feminist theory through its three central waves. The chapter gains additional depth by engaging with three influential feminist perspectives: Marxist, radical, and postmodern feminism.

Drawing on the conceptual foundation developed in the first two chapters, the final chapter presents a critical analysis of *The Stepford Wives*. The novel delivers a vivid disturbing depiction of the psychological, emotional, and existential effects of patriarchal oppression on women. In this regard, *The Stepford Wives* evolves beyond a mere dystopian tale, becoming an analysis of the psychological trauma driven by cultural norms, misogynistic ideals, and idealization of the "perfect woman".

This thesis seeks to unite psychological and feminist frameworks to offer a deeper insight into trauma as both individual and collective dimensions. Through an examination of trauma theory's historical development, the societal structures that enforce women's subjugation, and the depiction of psychological disintegration in literature, this thesis uncovers the persistent mechanisms that produce, perpetuate and silence trauma. Literature—exemplified by *The Stepford Wives* plays a crucial role in exposing suppressed realities and articulating long-silenced experiences. By acknowledging trauma as molded by both personal affliction and external structures, this thesis aims to advance interdisciplinary discourse about the multifaceted realities of women's trauma and defiance.

The research questions:

How has the understanding of psychological trauma evolved over time, and which pivotal theories have shaped its foundation?

How does the protagonist, along with other characters, reflect psychological trauma in Symbolic mode in *The Stepford Wives*?

Research hypothesis:

Women's psychological trauma is not merely an internal condition, but is molded by widespread patriarchal structures of power which is illustrated through societal

pressures, gender roles, and ideological authority, resulting in the erosion of women's identity and emotional resilience.

Joanna Eberhart's mental breakdown in *The Stepford Wives* acts as a metaphor for the psychological and emotional burden that stems from opposing societal expectations structured by traditional gender roles and masculine control. Joanna's deterioration exemplifies how trauma can be the outcome of ongoing societal constraints, symbolic manipulation, and the gradual dissolution of women's identity, beyond just acts of explicit violence.

Research objective:

The objective of this thesis is to explore intricate connection between psychological trauma and female oppression by mapping the development of trauma theory, drawing on the work of influential thinkers applying Marxist, radical, and postmodern feminist perspectives to analyze the structural factors behind women's psychological trauma and using *The Stepford Wives* as a literary framework that exposes patriarchal violence and the obliteration of women's subjectivity and selfhood.

***Chapter One:***  
***The Origins of***  
***Psychological trauma***

## **1.1.Introduction:**

Over the centuries, psychology has progressed from its philosophical foundations, into a comprehensive scientific field dedicated to understanding the nuances of human behavior, thought dynamics, and emotions. From the core ideas of structuralism and functionalism to the development of behaviorism and cognitive psychology, the discipline has progressively broadened its reach to more effectively comprehend the multifaceted nature of the mind. In the broad field of psychological research, psychological trauma has taken on increasing significance within the broader landscape of psychological research. Trauma exerts a profound impact on mental health, molding emotional, cognitive, and behavioral processes. Comprehending the essence of trauma, its psychological repercussions, and the theoretical models that explain its influence is vital for advancing both scholarly inquiry and therapeutic strategies.

The aim of this chapter is to delve in-depth examination of psychological trauma, commencing with a historical overview of psychology, its foundational schools of thought, and their contributions to the understanding of behavior and cognition. Afterward, the chapter will shed light to the exploration of trauma, investigating its psychological, emotional, and physical aspects. Lastly, it will conclude by delving into major trauma theories, assessing their influence on our awareness of trauma's outcomes.

## **1.2. Psychology as a theory:**

### **1.2.1 History and origin of psychology:**

Psychology is a comparatively new discipline, nonetheless its origins extend to the dawn of human civilization. The term psychology derives from the Greek roots' psycho, meaning "soul" or "mind," and logos meaning "study". Psychology is the scientific study of mind, mental state, human relationship and behavior. It is the precise patterns and behavioral propensities exhibited by individual or a group.

Similarly, Robert S. Feldman in his text book, *Essentials of Understanding Psychology* (2005), "Psychology is the science that seeks to understand behavior and mental processes and to apply that understanding in the service of human welfare ".

According to Hermann Ebbinghaus in his 1908 work, *Psychology: An Elementary Textbook*, " Psychology has a long past but only a short history". In its early stages, psychology was deeply intertwined with philosophy. Thinkers grappled with questions about the nature of consciousness, the relationship between mind and body, and the origins of knowledge. These philosophical inquiries laid the groundwork for what would eventually become empirical psychology<sup>1</sup>.

The word psychology surfaced within literature as early as 16th and 18th centuries. In the sixteenth century a theologian named Philip Melanchthon, whom plentiful deem, was the first mention psychology via Latinized forms of the authentic Greek words. afterward, Psychology began to acquire a new meaning as promoted by Christian Wolff within his work " *Psychologia Empirica*", in which he Recognized that is the Discipline investigate mental phenomena, which is psychology's initial effort that attempt to detach away from philosophy and religion.

Nevertheless, several scholars attach to their examination regarding the mind during this period yet, what does the origin have to do with philosophy? Philosophy arises within the historic study of philosophy, the field of great historical minds as Hippocrates Plato and Aristotle. Early scholars devoted their time hypothesizing on how the world functions, why we are here and why humans behave and act as they do.

A notable French philosopher René Descartes laid the underpinnings for exploring the mind using his proposed dualism. Descartes advocated that the mind was non-physical, a form of awareness and self-consciousness, which is not entirely biological. In opposition, the body is a mechanical structure that necessitates research and examination. Dividing the notions of mind and body clarified that a study for the mind was required. It wasn't till the 19th century that psychology involved into more extensively embraced, which advanced toward its modern sense as the study of mind and behavior.



Many regards Sigmund Freud to be the father of modern psychology but in fact, Wilhelm Wundt was the first to create a psychology Laboratory in 1879 in Leipzig, Germany, thereafter obtaining him the designation “Father of Psychology” along with his work titled “Principles of Physiological Psychology”, released in 1873.

Wundt endeavored to examine the mind impartially through a procedure that he labeled Introspection, which is a method in psychology that include noticing one's thoughts and considerations as well as feelings and sensations objectively. Wundt's experiments at the impartial study of the mind entailed instructing Individuals in introspection and iterating assessments in order to generate resembling outcomes. In this way, Wundt held that he had the ability to determine the components that constitute our mind and by what means this result in conscious experience.

### **1.2.2. The development of psychology:**

#### **1.2.2.1. The psychological school of structuralism:**

Wilhelm Wundt's theories shaped the basis of structuralism, which was the initial approach in psychology. Edward B. Titchener one of Wundt's students is initiator of the officially establishing this psychological school of thought - purpose being to understand and examine our cognitive framework, Wundt suggested that psychology should be tackled with the same inquisitive perspective. Although this idea of analyzing such a complex entity as mind might appear inconceivable today's world, structuralists were convinced they could inspect consciousness scientifically.

Wundt was the first to suggest introspection as an instrument to observe and analyze mental mechanisms. Introspection is a practice of self-awareness, interpreting notions to understand our own thoughts. To exercise this, investigators would introduce contributors with stimuli and ask them to depict their experiences impartially as precisely feasible. Wundt set the foundation of modern psychology's study into conscious perception. His squad would then evaluate testimonies attempting to reveal imperative elements of consciousness.

Structuralism was an influential movement in the preliminary period of psychology that imparted a profound imprint on the discipline. Wundt and his forerunners created

the basis for psychology to become a distinct experimental field of study, one which still prioritizes strict scientific research nowadays. In spite of their endeavor to probe the human mind scientifically, structuralists encounter severe criticisms owing to the reality that introspection is a totally subjective experience. Consequently, participants' accounts were subjective and contradictory. An opponent of structuralism was William James who endorsed for a contrasting approach in Psychology's History Timeline. James asserted that structuralism was unduly constrained in breadth as it concentrated on the "what" rather than the "why" of psychology. He proposed examining behavior and its function rather than analyzing consciousness, an approach which would subsequently become identified as Functionalism.

#### **1.2.2.2. The Psychological School of Functionalism:**

In *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), William James claimed that structuralists had an erroneous approach, asserting that consciousness is a procedure instead of something permanent and unchanged. Therefore, each attempt invested into studying and examining its framework would be misused vigor as it was constantly changing in nature. A more positive effort, according to him, would be exploring its role rather than striving to categorize its organizability.

The notion of "function" could be rendered in dual ways. On one aspect, it probed how the mind functions as an entity; on the other aspect, it relates to intellectual processes that enable adjustment; profoundly impacted by Charles Darwin's notion of evolutionary selection (survival of the fittest). Utilizing this line of ideas, James hypothesized that mental processes had essential objectives which were permitted to endure through times where our surroundings and conditions are continuously evolving. Thus, while structuralists inquired "What mental processes occur in the mind during the act of thinking?", functionalists aimed to responses and find explanations on both "how" and "why".

Moreover, James instituted the psychological school of functionalism concentrated in studying and examining behavior amidst a specific environment. Unlike introspection, functionalists applied a higher experimental method to undertake research; they gave precedence to monitoring subjects engage with external stimuli

within their authentic circumstances instead of questioning them about their thoughts, ideas, perceptions and experiences which could be extremely impacted and swayed through subjective inclination. This transition from subjective accounts into objective assessment persists essential within the realm of psychology in the present day. Both Structuralism and Functionalism possessed substantial contribution on the preliminary progress in the field of psychology as an autonomous branch. whilst they differed on strategies of study both schools of thought provided substantial input on our current understanding and knowledge of the human psyche, cognition and conduct.

### **1.2.2.3. The Psychological school of psychoanalysis:**

When the field of psychology is referenced or mention, Sigmund Freud name is inclined to be brought to mind. Following in the footsteps of structuralists and functionalists, Freud explored Veiled behavior, yet, he went beyond their scope by probing into the unconscious. He drew an analogy between the human psyche and an iceberg, where only a small portion observable while the vast majority concealed below. Freud asserted that underlying our thoughts and behavior the unconscious harbors force leading psychology to grasp and discern these concealed motives, desires, instincts, tendencies and drives to gain a fuller comprehensive insight of human beings. Despite the fact that many modern psychologists do not endorse Freud's psychoanalytic theory, his profound imprint on the discipline of psychology remains incontestable. By broadening innovativeness concepts in psychology and presenting one of the most extensive models and thorough theories of personality, Freud illuminated the operations and mechanisms of the unconscious mind and in what ways the progression and the foundations of character are established and molded in infancy.

Freud's groundbreaking work pioneering theories have motivated innumerable practitioners and scholars, some of whom have elaborated on his ideas while others have offered dissenting perspectives. Being the progenitor of a psychotherapy approach that retains its relevance today. This, however, represents surface of the profound legacy he has exerted on psychology through the passage of time. Freud's psychoanalytic framework is arguably the most prominent school of psychological thought yet it endures widespread criticism. The scarcity and deficiency concerning

scientific substantiation stemming from the abstract concepts poses challenges in obtaining tangible evidence for this methodology. There are those who argued that post-childhood experiences on personality development are often underemphasized and neglected with undue attention given to mental illness rather than fostering constructive behavioral changes and transformations.

#### **1.2.2.4. The Psychological School of Behaviorism:**

Across the history and the evolution of psychology, structuralism, functionalism, and psychoanalysis were united by a common trait, a strong emphasis on mental and psychological mechanisms that are imperceptible to human visual perception. In vehemently contested to this notion, John B. Watson advocate for behaviorism a perspective focused on the systematic study of observable behaviors grounded in scientific lens. This ignited a sweeping revolution across all schools and areas of psychology; although Watson's innovative ideas, it remains reverberate in contemporary discussions as the study and exploration of mental phenomena persists unresolved and without a final resolution or consensus.

Behaviorists posit that human behavior can be comprehended by exploring the connections and the causal links between external stimuli and individuals' behavioral responses and outcomes. dismissing subjective approaches such as introspection, which lacked consistency even among trained and profession researchers instead prioritizing the study of observable behavior. This marked a paradigm transition from mind study to a focus solely on observable behaviors and actions. Expanding upon Watson's foundational principles and ideas, B.F. Skinner, a prominent behaviorist, argued that environmental stimuli and reinforcement are the principal determinants of human behaviors and actions rather than internal mental or cognitive processes. Skinner's model of reinforcement posits that individuals adjust and alter their behavior in reaction to advantageous or adverse repercussions. This theoretical framework suggests that when behaviors succeeded by favorable feedback are more prone to reoccurrence in the future, whereas actions followed by unfavorable feedback are less likely to be repeated.

For a deeper understanding of this term, it is crucial to recognize that reinforcement can occur immediately or delayed and may consist of physical rewards or abstract incentives. Although the scientific evidence supporting certain elements of behaviorism has gained a widespread acceptance among numerous modern psychologists, this framework continues to face ongoing critiques due to its neglect of subjective experiences, alongside disregard for biological interpretations in explaining behavior. Following this, behaviorists adopted a more sophisticated perspective considering both external and internal behaviors, paving the way for these researchers to become identified as cognitive behaviorists.

#### **1.2.2.5. The Psychological School of cognitive:**

Cognitive psychology marked a pivotal advancement in the field of psychology, arising in the 1960s, as a reaction to the constraints and limitations of behaviorism. This approach centers on the study of decision-making, memories formation, and information processing, drawing on both empirical experimentation and observation-based theories. Despite the absence of a singular theory that characterizes cognitive psychology, its core tenets are widely accepted by present-day psychologists.

Cognitive psychologists contend that behavior can be understood through internal thought processes, distinguishing it from behaviorist approaches, which solely address external conditions like environmental influences or reinforcement /punishment paradigms. Leading cognitive theorists, Aaron Beck and Albert Ellis, introduced two highly foundational cognitive approaches in the field: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT). These therapeutic models highlight the pivotal role of thoughts in affecting behavior, emotions, and internal struggle.

Cognitive psychology's emergence has enhanced greater awareness of mental functioning and the motivations behind human actions. This approach strives to uncover the underlying reasons behind human behavior by delving into conscious and unconscious thought processes while examining how contextual factors shape and influence interpretation, decision-making, and behavior. Although the field remains a

topic of considerable debate, it continues to be a critical branch of psychology, providing profound revelations about the intricacies of the human mind.

### **1.3. Understanding trauma:**

As humans, we are part of an exceptionally hardy species. From antiquity, human beings have shown an enduring ability to withstand recurring wars, various calamities and the struggles of interpersonal harm and treachery. Yet, the consequences of traumatic experiences persist, whether manifesting on a macro level, altering our histories and cultural paradigm or on a micro level affecting our families as hidden truths subtly infiltrate successive generations. They likewise imprint themselves on our mental and emotional states, our ability of happiness and intimacy, reaching even to our biology and immune response.

Trauma is drawn from the Greek word τραῦμα, or traûma, meaning “wound,” and can be dated back to the mid-17th century (Kolaitis et al., 2017). While historically used to denote physical injury, the term is currently linked to psychological or emotional wounds. According to the APA Dictionary of Psychology, Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, crime, natural disaster, physical or emotional abuse, neglect, experiencing or witnessing violence, death of a loved one, war, and more. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea. According to Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2013, p,48), " Trauma is a widespread, harmful, and costly public health problem. It occurs as a result of violence, abuse, neglect, loss, disaster, war, and other emotionally harmful experiences. Trauma has no boundaries with regard to age, gender, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, geography, or sexual orientation ".

Trauma's effects impose considerable strain on individuals, families, and communities, in addition to generating obstacles for public institutions and service systems. Even though many individuals affected by traumatic event, proceed with their lives without lasting detrimental repercussions, others may struggle more and exhibit traumatic stress symptoms. Van der Kolk (2014, p,14) emphasizes in *The Body Keeps*

the Score that " The essence of trauma is that it is overwhelming, unbelievable, and unbearable ". Those who are traumatized may feel and behave as if their nervous system is out of sync with the present reality. In the aftermath of traumatic event, the human self-preservation mechanisms remain in a state of perpetual alertness, anticipating the potential return of danger.

Whilst trauma, in its broadest sense, can influence both the body and brain, findings from recent scientific fields, have shown that psychological trauma induces physiological alterations, such as a reconfiguration of the brain's alarm system, heightened activity of stress-related hormones, and changes in the process that distinguish relevant from irrelevant information. Psychological trauma is a highly emotional and psychologically distressing experience which sustains damage in the mind. Judith Herman stated, "Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless " (Herman, 1992, p. 24). Psychological trauma stems from exceptionally distressing experiences that dismantle one's sense of stability and evoke a sense of vulnerability in a seemingly hostile environment. It may result in prolonged emotional distress, intrusive memories and persistent anxiety. Furthermore, it can cause feelings of numbness, a sense of disconnection, and impairing your capacity to trust others.

Over the course of the last century, a particular type of psychological trauma has reappeared within public awareness, in every instance, the investigation of this trauma has paralleled the rise of a corresponding political movement. The initial instance was the phenomenon of hysteria, a psychological disorder predominantly linked to women. Its clinical investigation became intertwined with the republican, anticlerical political movement in late nineteenth-century France. The second instance was Shell shock, also known as combat neurosis, was first studied in England and the United States after World War I, reaching its height after the Vietnam War. This was closely tied to the decline of war glorification and the rise of antiwar sentiments.

The latest form of trauma to emerge in the public consciousness, is sexual and domestic violence that is framed within the political backdrop of the feminist movement in Western Europe and North America. Yet, the greatest progress occurred in understanding hysteria, the term derived from the Greek word for "womb" which

originally thought to be an ailment of neurotic or feigning women, however, it has evolved as a means of uncovering the intricate connection of mind and body. Van der Kolk states, " hysteria a mental disorder characterized by emotional outbursts, susceptibility to suggestion, and contractions and paralyzes of the muscles that could not be explained by simple anatomy" (Van der Kolk,2014, p. 195). The discovery that trauma lies at the heart of hysteria is deeply credited to the pioneering research of Jean-Martin Charcot, Pierre Janet, and Sigmund Freud in neurology and psychiatry. Traumatic memories were labelled as "pathogenic secrets" or "mental parasites." By early theorists noting that regardless of the desire and attempts to repress the memories, they continuously intrude upon their consciousness, imprisoning them a recurring present of existential terror.

As with hysteria, shell shock emerged as an instance of psychological trauma closely tied to its sociopolitical realities of its era. Coined in 1915, "shell shock " described the physical and psychological trauma exhibited by soldiers following their reentering from world War I. Dr. Charles Myers of the Royal Army Medical Corps ,first coined the term shell shock, in the early months of World War I, to identify the symptoms of soldiers who endured confusion, memory impairment, dizziness, and insomnia with loss of speech, olfactory dysfunction, altered states of consciousness, flashbacks, paralysis, visual disturbances, and recurring nightmares.

At first, clinicians and military leaders were bewildered and confused by this condition. As the primary presumption was that the symptoms stemmed and resulted from the from the direct physical impact of shell explosions. Only in a secondary evaluation, professionals determined that the symptoms aligned with those of hysteria and shared clinical presentation of neurasthenia. Understanding that Shell Shock held a distinct medical etiology and was directly associated with the detonation of shells or bombs. The severity of such incidents, as asserted by Dr. Myers along with other psychological experts, could cause emotional trauma, targeting the psyche rather than the body.

In an effort to prevent the recurrence of shell shock experienced in 1914–18, civil and military authorities banned the use of the term in 1939, and declared that psychiatric



war injuries would not qualify for war pensions. From then on, soldiers stricken with combat stress were to be labelled as suffering from 'exhaustion' and kept in service. Over time, this condition led to the identification of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a prevalent mental health disorder that can arise as a result of traumatic experience with symptoms like flashbacks, anxiety, negative thoughts, hypervigilance that the overarching term for any form of post-traumatic stress response, comprising those stemming from shell shock related to combat.

As the understanding of trauma advanced, it progressively encompasses sexual and domestic violence. Judith Herman claims " The study of trauma in sexual and domestic life becomes legitimate only in a context that challenges the subordination of women and children " (Herman, 1992, p. 5). Childhood sexual trauma survivors are commonly affected by PTSD, depression, suicidal ideation, alcohol dependence, and nutritional disorders. They might also encounter challenges and are prone to be involved in diminished sexual desire, difficulty in relationships, risk-laden sexual behavior along with extreme coping mechanisms.

In severe manifestations of the trauma, women may manifest symptoms of psychological disorder notably one marked by chronic instability and impulsivity, like borderline personality disorder. While data on risk factors remains sparse, it underscores the importance of a stable family atmosphere and the attentive responses from intimate partners in boosting survivors' psychological health and recovery of survivors. However, trauma experienced in adulthood can result in profound emotional turmoil, as it related to both immediate and prolonged psychological repercussions with immediate symptoms like shock, fear, anxiety, confusion, and reclusiveness. Although many survivors find symptom alleviation after a few months, some women endure prolonged distress for years. To manage the prolonged pain of sexual trauma, individuals might turn to maladaptive coping strategies like substance abuse or self-harm.

Women and children in contemporary society, commonly endure trauma within the familial or intimate partner relationships, with parents and partners serving as the predominant contributors. Van der Kolk asserts "Child abuse, molestation, and

domestic violence all are inflicted by people who are supposed to love you. That knocks out the most important protection against being traumatized: being sheltered by the people you love"(Van der Kolk, 2014, p. 228). This indicates that if your primary caregivers, whom you instinctively rely and depend on to offer you care, comfort, love and protection, become sources of fear and rejection, the result is an emotional detachment and suppressing feelings as a means of emotional self-defense.

The combination of hysteria, shell shock, domestic and sexual violence, underscore the importance for a multidimensional approach to trauma, incorporating individual experiences and socio-cultural contexts, to efficiently tackle and mitigate psychological anguish.

#### **1.4. The theories of psychological trauma:**

##### **1.4.1. Judith Herman: Trauma and recovery:**

Judith Lewis Herman, a prominent psychiatrist and expert in trauma research, was born in New York City in 1942. She graduated from Radcliffe College later obtained her medical degree from Harvard University in 1968. Completing her residency in psychiatry at Boston University Medical Center, Judith Lewis Herman began her tenure as a professor of psychiatry at Harvard University in 1981, and has held the position of psychiatric director at the Women's Mental Health Collective in Somerville, Massachusetts, since 1973. Much of Judith Herman's professional career has focused on the challenges stemming from posttraumatic stress. Her pivotal 1992 publication, *Trauma and Recovery*, presented innovative ideas for understanding, defining, and addressing posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The foundation of Herman's theory was grounded in years of experience working with individuals who had endured trauma including those who survived sexual assault, domestic violence, natural disasters, and military combat. For Judith Herman "To study psychological trauma is to come face to face both with human vulnerability in the natural world and with the capacity for evil in human nature" (Herman, 1992, p.4). Judith Herman's book proposed that the clinical trauma symptoms experienced by survivors of military, political, sexual, and interpersonal violence shared similar

patterns. She emphasized that the psychological trauma and its potential and the expected impact on a survivor are frequently determined by the social environment in which the trauma happened.

By presenting her findings along with her compelling argument for considering the environment and a person's response to overwhelming life experiences, contributed in changing blame away from survivors, who had traditionally been regarded as vulnerable and inadequate due to their suffering. Just like in traumatology, neuroscience focuses on biological responses to trauma rather than framing symptoms as a personal shortcoming. Herman divided her book into two parts: the first addresses history, qualitative distinctions in trauma, and PTSD symptoms, and the second part covers the treatment of PTSD. Herman's work stood out for its deliberate inclusion of feminist ideals, highlighting the role of gender-based violence and societal power structures on trauma. This pioneering approach widened the scope of trauma and management promoting more inclusive and holistic approaches to mental health treatments.

Recovery, as she outlined, happens in three stages. The first stage prioritizes the establishment of safety, the second centers on remembrance and mourning, while the third stage is about reconnecting with everyday life. The primary task in recovery lies in securing the survivor's safety, as no further therapeutic steps succeed without this critical prerequisite. So, it is essential to achieve a reasonable level of safety before engaging in any other therapeutic actions. Hermann suggest that " In an attempt to create some sense of safety and to control their pervasive fear, traumatized people restrict their lives" (Herman, 1992, p.33). Building safety begins with gaining control over the body, then gradually expands to include control over the external environment.

In the second stage of recovery "Remembrance and Mourning", the survivor recounts their trauma story. This reconstructive work alters the traumatic memory, allowing it to become part of the survivor's life story. Herman argues that "Recovery requires remembrance and mourning"" (Herman, 1992, p174). This phase entails reviewing and discussing memories to diminish their emotional severity, adjust their

significance to one's life and identity and work through mourning and grief about harmful or negative experiences and their lasting consequences.

In the third stage, the focus shifts to reconstructing lives and relationships, where individuals work toward creating a new self-identity that acknowledges their trauma while ensuring it doesn't dominate their life narrative. Herman affirms " Helplessness and isolation are the core experiences of psychological trauma. Empowerment and reconnection are the core experiences of recovery" (Herman, 1992, p. 141), meaning that this transformative phase focus on self-empowerment and pursuing fresh personal objectives, which may involve discovering new passions, or boosting one's overall quality of life.

As individuals move through these stages, they slowly restore their sense of autonomy, intention and direction, advancing in life with increased resilience and optimism.

#### **1.4.2. Bassel van der Kolk: Trauma and the Body:**

Dr. Bessel van der Kolk is a renowned psychiatrist, researcher, and educator. Dr. Bessel van der Kolk is widely recognized for his work on trauma, particularly in his book *The Body Keeps the Score*. He began his career in trauma by working at one of the earliest clinical research centers focused on trauma treatment and research. He began his career by studying post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the effects of mental health medications on it. Van der Kolk worked hands-on with traumatized adults, many of whom were veterans, to explore the workings of trauma and the recovery process. The focus of Bessel van der Kolk's research is on building secure connections with oneself and others while increasing awareness of one's internal emotional states. He has researched a variety of trauma treatments, such as yoga, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), neurofeedback, and psychedelic therapy.

After decades of expertise and studies, much of which went beyond conventional treatment practices, Bessel authored this best-selling book, which has been translated into 43 languages. Following its release, Bessel van der Kolk's findings and

perspectives have been used by clinicians and the broader public to create new perspectives on trauma and how it affects the body as a whole. His book compiles the essence of his years of research, his discoveries about trauma as well as myths he dispelled, and the healing approaches he believes to be most effective. For instance, Francine Shapiro (as cited in van der Kolk, 2014, p. 4), while describing the book, states, "A fascinating exploration of a wide range of therapeutic treatments shows readers how to take charge of the healing process, gain a sense of safety, and find their way out of the morass of suffering."

In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel van der Kolk examines the relationship between trauma and its effects on the body, emotions, and the underlying truths of behaviors including avoidance, substance use, and anger. His direct interactions and research with PTSD patients provided the foundation for his conclusions, and evidence-based hypotheses. He outlines and details PTSD symptoms, explaining how they evolve into harmful behaviors, and how traumatic stress shapes and controls neuroscience. As an illustration, Jessica Stern (as cited in van der Kolk, 2014, p. 4) notes that *The Body Keeps the Score* "articulates new and better therapies for toxic stress based on a deep understanding of the effects of trauma on brain development and attachment systems." Leading the way in understanding the mind-body interconnection, Bessel van der Kolk demonstrated this through extensive studies. His book delves into his discoveries, detailing how trauma impacts the body and offering pathways for trauma survivors to heal authentically.

#### **1.4.3. Pierre Janet: Dissociation and fixed ideas:**

Pierre Marie Félix Janet (1859-1947), a highly regarded French psychologist, physician, and philosopher Known for his groundbreaking research and his pioneering work on dissociation. In exploring trauma, Janet's theory of dissociation provides a backdrop, incorporating concepts such as dissociation and fixed ideas, that he developed or expanded upon.

Though the idea of dissociation had been previously mentioned, Pierre Janet was the first to methodically and distinctly illustrating how it acts as the most immediate psychological defense against intense traumatic occurrences. He proved that

dissociative phenomena are central to the wide range of post-traumatic stress reactions, which he classified within the framework of the 19th-century diagnosis of hysteria.

A range of factors can interfere with the integrative function resulting in the splitting off (*dédoublement*) and segregation of specific psychological governing mechanisms. These dissociated nuclei of consciousness carry on existing autonomously, as evidenced by Lucie/Adrienne. The various nuclei of consciousness alternate in dictating behavior or interfere with one another. These dissociated conditions of consciousness can exhibit different levels of complexity. The utmost complex of these dissociated conditions of consciousness are the alternate identities diagnosed with multiple personality disorder (MPD). Within multiple personality disorder (MPD), an alter personality may maintain its own life history, along with consistent patterns of perception, self-awareness, and interaction with the environment. Each alter personality develop its own sense of identity and differ itself from the primary personality.

The simplest form, however, involves fixed ideas (*idées fixes*), which are thoughts or mental images that grow disproportionately, carry intense emotional charge and, in patients with hysteria are detached from the regular personality. (Janet, 1894, 1895). Real-life enactment occurs when they control consciousness. Fixed ideas can persist detached, yet they can also evolve automatically, by incorporating new impressions or connecting with other fixed ideas. Due to their dissociation, the individual is unconscious of them, at least for a while. These ideas appear in dreams, dissociative episodes like hysterical attacks and somnambulistic states, and through automatic writing.

### **1.5. Conclusion:**

The progression of psychology and its focus on trauma unveil the complex links between the mind, body, and the experiences that define our existence. The journey from core psychological schools like behaviorism, structuralism, functionalism, and cognitive psychology to an in-depth analysis of trauma highlights the field's commitment unraveling the intricate nature of human life.

Illustrating the layered nature and the multifaceted impact of trauma, the theories explored in this chapter highlight the necessity of a comprehensive approach that incorporates its psychological, emotional, and physical aspects. The findings presented in this chapter set the stage for ongoing consultations about interventions and the wider societal consequences of psychological trauma, especially in relation to women.

## **Chapter two:**

# **Women's oppression**

## **2.1. Introduction:**

Women's oppression has endured throughout history molded by intersecting economic, social, and political systems. In seeking to challenge gender inequality, feminist scholars and activists have contributed to the emergence of multiple feminist theories and movements.

This chapter explore the nature of women's oppression, its different forms, and the historical trajectory of feminist activism. Examining Marxist, radical, and postmodern feminist perspectives uncover the complex ways in which gender oppression intersects with class, race, and capitalism. In addition to examining oppression, these perspectives offer strategies for resistance and societal change.



## **2.2. Defining women's oppression:**

Oppression is the systemic disadvantaging to the subjugation or devaluation of certain groups by others, stemming from long-standing social hierarchies and prejudices. It manifests through various forms, such as marginalization, persecution, disenfranchisement, and other barriers to equity tied to social identity (e.g., anti-Black racism, heterosexism). It imposes severe constraints and restrictions on individuals, groups, or institutions limiting their agency and access to resources. It is sustained by entrenched social norms, institutional structures, interpersonal dynamics, and deeply ingrained beliefs.

Women's oppression is a multidimensional and systemic phenomenon characterized by discrimination, social marginalization, and subjugation of women across diverse cultural and societal context restricting their fundamental rights and opportunities. This structural inequality is exacerbated by political, economic, social, and cultural upheavals and conflicts that sustain gender inequality and reinforce patriarchal hegemony which intensified during periods of global instability in the 20th century.

Despite decades of advocacy and long-standing movements for gender equality, women in the 21st century still burdened by systemic oppression. Economic inequality remains one of the most persistent forms of gender-based oppression with women earning approximately 30% less than their male counterparts in equivalent roles, with women of color facing even greater disparities. This disparity is merely one symptom of a deeper system of exploiting and undervaluing female labor.

Throughout history women have been subjected to unpaid or poorly compensated labor, hazardous work environments and economic reliance on male counterparts. Despite its crucial role, domestic work is predominantly shouldered by women, entrenching economic inequality. Women are also disproportionately concentrated low-paying sectors and frequently encounter barriers to upward mobility because of the enduring "glass ceiling." With these economic hardships, women are frequently left dependent on inadequate welfare systems or into the realm of sex work.

The cumulative effect of these systemic inequalities, has led to the "feminization of poverty," with women making up the majority of impoverished and bear the heaviest burdens during financial instability. This oppression is not a byproduct of economic shifts but an ingrained function of capitalist and patriarchal structures that uphold power through gendered labor divisions.

The political realm remains a site of systemic inequality for women where historical disenfranchisement casting a lasting consequence. Although suffrage movements won women the right to vote in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, substantive political empowerment remains out of reach. Even in modern politics, women are frequently confined to secondary roles rather than being recognized as independent authorities.

The regulation of women's bodies and their reproductive rights is one of the most fiercely debated forms of oppression. Women have long been classified as private property within the family, a legacy that persists today through restrictive legislation limiting their autonomy over their bodies and their reproductive choices. Although abortion and contraception remain legal in some regions, these rights are facing growing restriction in numerous other regions.

Alongside economic and political constraints, women experience widespread cultural oppression reinforced through various media, advertising, and entertainment platforms. The portrayal of women in media frequently depicted as passive, lacking intelligence, and primarily existing for male gratification. This objectification is visible in television, music videos, magazines, pornography, and advertisements, harmful sexist stereotypes. Such depictions influence public attitudes, legitimizing mistreatment while promoting misogynistic behaviors. Thus, achieving a truly equality must address not only the economic liberation but also the deep-seated cultural and social structures that uphold gender oppression.

### **2.3. Types of oppression:**

#### **2.3.1. Patriarchy:**

Patriarchy is a social, political, economic, and spiritual system that governs society and devalue of women and their roles. It emerges from the institutionalization of sex-based power relations and sustained by interconnected institutions that enforce the women's devaluation. These systems of domination not only strengthen male dominance but also align with other systems of oppression, creating States that prioritize the benefits and interests of a privileged male elite. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, patriarchy is a social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family, the legal dependence of wives and children, and the reckoning of descent and inheritance in the male line.

From a traditionalist standpoint, patriarchy is a natural order instead of a social construct, with men being inherently dominating and women being subordinate. Depending on different models of patriarchy, women face varying intensities and forms of violence with some forms being inherent to all patriarchal systems and others determined by specific cultural, religious, or economic configurations.

As the first recognized system of subordination and domination in recorded history, patriarchy still acknowledged as a fundamental framework of oppression, meaning that patriarchy has been a major force behind women's oppression, reinforcing male dominance in both personal and societal spheres restricting female's autonomy. Women are burdened with domestic duties and social expectations expected to prioritize men's demands. They bear the bulk of household labor like household chores, childcare, and caregiving while simultaneously struggling with objectification. In addition, they are diminished to sexual partners, denying them full autonomy. As a result, women continue to face ongoing injustice, harassment, systemic oppression, mistreatment and violence, all perpetuated by patriarchal gender roles.

In *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, Maria Mies contends that the rise of patriarchal domination is linked to men's role as hunters. Their mastery of weaponry and violence enabled them to exert control not only over animals but over women and other men. Within nomadic pastoral societies for instance, this dynamic relegated women to reproductive and domestic duties while men amassed their dominance through militarization and wealth accumulation.

In his seminal study *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), Frederick Engels analyzed the historical roots of women's oppression. He asserted that women's subordination emerged with the rise of private property, signifying what he called the "world-historical defeat of the female sex." Engels argued that the evolution of class hierarchies and the suppression of women were products of historical developments. This indicates that patriarchal oppression predates capitalism and persists alongside class exploitation. While abolishing private property as Marxists proposes could establish the basis for gender equality, this reform alone would not be enough to eradicate deeply ingrained patriarchal norms.

At its core, patriarchy reinforces exploitative structures that entrench male privilege compromising women's agency and rights. Within its systems the disproportionately control of power, decision-making authority, resources under the hands of men, leave women and non-binary individuals vulnerable to systemic discrimination and oppression.

### **2.3.2. Objectification:**

Objectification is the process of dehumanizing a person as a mere object or thing rather than a human being. While objectification can happen to both men and women, the concept is largely associated with women's objectification.

Objectification theory posits that the sexual objectification of women in Westernized societies results in numerous situations where the female body is publicly exposed. It describes how sexual objectification is ingrained in everyday interactions. This includes prolonged staring, unauthorized photography of women, catcalling, honking at female pedestrians, and consuming media that objectifies women in hypersexualized manner. At its most severe, sexual objectification contributes to harassment, rape and physical violence. These objectifying experiences unfolds in two contexts, interpersonal encounters and media representations.

According to feminist theorists, the repeated sexual objectification of women and girls mounts over time, reinforcing internalized experiences. This results in self-

objectification, where women come to view and treat themselves as objects based on their physical appearance.

The pervasive objectification and sexualization of women and girls are linked to a broader sexist ideology that uphold systemic gender disparities. With a cultural backdrop in place that normalizes the scrutiny of women's bodies, objectification theory does not endeavor to determine the root causes this practice. Instead, it aims to illuminate the psychological effects of self-objectification on women and to uncover the potential mechanisms that manifest this process.

The experience of sexual objectification fosters a divided sense of self, accompanied by enduring and possibly unrelenting feelings of shame and anxiety. These psychological struggles along with a reduced ability for pleasure, may underlie the onset of depression in some women's depression. Lewinsohn's model suggests that objectification elevates women's depression susceptibility. Recent theorists argues that victimization among women may explain up to one-third of the gender gap in depression (Cutler & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991; Hamilton & Jensvold, 1992; Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994).

By deepening the sociocultural exploration of the female body within the psychology of women and gender, objectification theory presents a methodical way to interpret women's uniquely female experiences. As articulated by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), it plays a crucial role in examining, researching and intervening in the sociocultural system that objectifies women and defines their value through physical appearance and sexuality.

### **2.3.3. Gender roles:**

Gender roles refer to a set of behaviors, expectations and standards shaped by society based on traditional ideas of being male or female. The concept of "gender role" was first introduced by New Zealand-American sexologist John Money. Money (1955) defines gender role as "all those things that a person says or does to disclose himself or herself as having the status of boy or man, girl or woman, respectively. It

includes, but is not restricted to sexuality in the sense of eroticism" (as cited in Byrne, 2020, p. 1).

Gender roles stem from societal norms and the expectations set by individuals which are determined by biological sex and molded by the cultural constructs and gender beliefs. Gender roles emerge from the dynamic relationship between individuals and their surroundings, defining standards of socially appropriate behavior based on each sex. This implies that gender roles dictate the responsibilities placed on men and women according to their sex. In many Western societies, femininity have traditionally been associated nurturing qualities. As a result, women have fulfilled this role by dedicating themselves to full-time homemaking rather than seeking outside employment. Whereas, in conventional gender roles, men are presumed to be leaders and serving as the heads of their households by providing financial support and making crucial family decisions.

Discussions of gender roles often framed through gender role orientation, which is classified as traditional or nontraditional. A traditional orientation underscores the distinctions between men and women, assuming that each sex is naturally drawn to particular behaviors. People who uphold a traditional gender role orientation tend to be influenced by societal norms inherited from earlier generations, including their parents and grandparents. Conversely, those with a nontraditional orientation reject the notion that behavior should be exclusively dictated by one's sex. Those with nontraditional gender role orientations support gender equality between men and women and advocate for individual autonomy to determine their own roles, regardless of sex.

The feminist viewpoint emphasizes that gender roles go beyond prescribing appropriate behavior for men and women— they also reflect broader systemic power structures between the sexes. One example of male power in society is men's ability to maintain economic control over themselves and their families. Since men are typically seen as the main financial providers, women often face a greater hardship after marital dissolution.

Stereotypical beliefs about gender contribute to the emergence of roles assigned for males and females in society. Stereotypical notions of gender influence how people

interpret appropriate gender roles. Exaggerated assumptions about masculinity and femininity form a fundamental core of gender stereotypes. One example is the belief that men are emotionally detached. Meanwhile, women are stereotypically seen as overly sensitive or irrational. Activist movements like feminism continue to dismantle gender stereotypes and promote vision of gender roles that prioritize equality.

#### **2.4. The feminist movement:**

Feminism is a broad movement that committed to ensure equality for all genders. Throughout history, people fought against gender-based restrictions but feminism as a structured political, intellectual and movement originated in Europe during the mid-19th century. In the 1830s, French philosopher Charles Fourier coined the term “féminisme” while “feminist” was first documented in the Oxford English Dictionary appeared in 1852. From that point, feminism has developed into many forms and spread internationally.

From legal frameworks to cultural norms feminism has significantly challenged the predominant perspectives in diverse fields within Western society. The feminist movement has advocated for women's legal rights including property and voting rights, advocating for bodily autonomy and integrity, protection from domestic violence, ensuring equality in the workplace, in addition to striving to eliminate misogyny and discrimination. As G.D Anderson stated "Feminism isn't about making women stronger. Women are already strong. It's about changing the way the world perceives that strength."

Feminism is commonly evolved through three major waves the first wave in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the second wave during the 1960s and 1970s, and the third wave which began in the 1990s and remains into the present day.

##### **2.4.1. First wave feminism:**

The first wave of feminism, emerged as a long-lasting movement during the 19th and early 20th centuries shaping the groundwork for feminist advocacy in both the UK and the US. At its core, it centered on securing women's rights in contracts and property while opposing the practice of chattel marriage and the legal possession of wives and

their children by their husbands. Toward the close of the nineteenth century, the movement's focus started prioritizing political rights, particularly women's suffrage with the expectation that this right would act as a catalyst for access to broader rights. During this era women's main focus was securing legal rights. The Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 is widely recognized as the beginning of the American first-wave feminism in the United States which many abolitionists acknowledged the significance of its attendees as well. The convention was notably organized by Lucretia Mott and Cady Stanton, with 300 participants.

As the principal author of the Declaration of Sentiments, delivered a compelling message that left an enduring impact on the course of the movement. Listing 16 grievances and 11 resolutions, the document addressed women's inequalities in civil, social, political, and religious rights, calling for transformative reforms. A central point in Stanton's argument was that women's subjugation contradicted the core principles of American democracy, stating in her speech, "The right is ours. The question now is: how shall we get possession of what rightfully belongs to us?" (Stanton 1848). By using the lens and the language of freedom and equality, Stanton reinforced that gender equality was a fundamental issue of justice and liberty rather than a peripheral concern.

Many activists widely believed that without suffrage, their goals would be hard to reach out. numerous advocates in the U.S., particularly women of color like Maria Stewart and Sojourner Truth struggled to merge this cause with universal suffrage. However, the mainstream feminist movement including figures like Susan B. Anthony sidelined these voices and exploited racist rhetoric to further its own agenda most notably after the 1870 passage of the 15th Amendment which ostensibly granted voting rights to Black men and caused widespread frustration among white suffragettes. The first wave of feminism concluded in 1920, with its greatest success—the suffrage movement. That year, the 19th Amendment was ratified, securing women's voting rights by banning sex-based voting restrictions.

#### **2.4.2. Second wave feminism:**



Emerging in the 1960s and lasting into the 1970s, the second wave of feminism was a defining era in the American women's movement. Building upon the foundation of the first wave, second-wave feminism fought to advocate for women's societal transformation through cultural influence, legislative progress, and court rulings. Unlike the first wave, which prioritized voting and property rights for a select group of women, second-wave feminists sought to redefine womanhood, promote financial independence and workplace equality, secure reproductive rights, oppose domestic violence and demand greater gender equality. The movement arose in the 1960s, a period of a profound social transformation in the United States, influenced by the civil rights movement and Vietnam War protests. In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir, a French writer and philosopher thought with *Le Deuxième Sexe* (The Second Sex), laid the groundwork for contemporary feminist theory, exploring the social construction nature of womanhood and disputing the systemic relegation of women to a secondary status. She maintained that societal constructs of gender stems from the widespread notion of women's marginalization.

Expanding on Beauvoir's work, American writer Betty Friedan, Triggered the emergence of second-wave feminism in America, with her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan conducted oral histories interviewed white, middle-class, college-educated women who were dissatisfied with domesticity. In her book, she highlighted the systemic oppression and discrimination women faced, questioning societal assumptions that limited them to motherhood and homemaking.

The successes of second-wave feminism set the stage for future legal and social advancements for equality and social justice. For instance, The Civil Rights Act of 1964, passed by Congress, banned discrimination based on race, color, national origin, sex, or religion. This was a landmark win for both the Civil Rights Movement and second-wave feminism, setting the stage for further progress, particularly securing women's reproductive health rights. For instance, in 1960, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) authorized the first oral contraceptive. Just eight years later, *Roe v. Wade* secured women's legal right to abortion before fetal viability.

In addition to expanding educational advancements and leadership positions across various industries, second-wave feminism confronted stereotypes and uplifted women who felt restricted by traditional gender roles. Numerous branches of feminism took shape at this time, some pushing for the complete dissolution of family, private property, and the state, while others promoted incremental change. Despite these differences, all activists remained focused on how gender roles oppressed women.

#### **2.4.3. Third wave feminism:**

Emerging in the early 1990s, third-wave feminism was driven by Generation X—Americans born in the 1960s and 1970s, who matured in a period of media saturation and a multicultural, economically varied environment. Often credited with introducing the term third-wave feminism, Rebecca Walker played a key role in defining core principles. Writing in *Ms. Magazine* in 1992, Rebecca Walker, in her essay "Becoming the Third Wave", she voiced her deep frustration with systemic sexism and the feminist backlash, particularly following the Anita Hill hearings. She proclaimed, "My frustration and awareness must manifest in real action. To be a feminist is to embody the principles of equality and women's empowerment in every aspect of life. I reject postfeminism—I am the Third Wave." (Walker, 1992). This proclamation was a defining moment for third-wave feminism, highlighting intersectionality, personal agency, and activism. By urging individuals to weave feminist principles into their daily actions, Walker's call to action signified a shift toward a feminism that merged the personal with the political. Departing from the second wave's focus on institutional and legal battles, third-wave feminism emphasized personal identity, cultural representation, and inclusivity, advocating for a broader feminist movement that recognized race, class, and sexuality integral elements of gender equality.

The lack of a unified definition of third-wave feminism is unsurprising, as the movement is inherently adaptable and continuously evolving. According to Evans (2015), some feminists see it as an intersectional movement that acknowledges diverse identities and the overlapping forms of oppression individuals face. She stated that intersectionality was seen as one of the cores defining features of the third wave (Evan 2015). The concept of intersectionality was first coined in 1989 by Kimberlé

Crenshaw, a critical race theorist, presenting a lens through which to acknowledge the intersection of identities in defining women lived experiences, intensifying and complicating the various forms of oppression they experience. This implies that women who experience overlapping injustices are layered and inseparable.

In her work *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*, Crenshaw challenges U.S. antidiscrimination law for addressing the intersectional oppression that Black women endure. She contends that judicial interpretations of discrimination treat race and sex as distinct categories instead of recognizing their intersections. She highlights this issue, stating, "Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated." (Crenshaw, 1989, p.140). This reflects Crenshaw's claim that a single-axis model, that focus solely on race or gender capture an incomplete comprehension of discrimination.

Third-wave feminism prioritizes intersectionality, highlighting how race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality collectively influence individual's lived experiences in nuanced ways. As Henry (2004) explains, "gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class never function in isolation but always work as interconnected categories of oppression and privilege" (as cited in Iannello, 2010, p. 71). This view reinforces the third wave's commitment to inclusivity, challenging narrow frameworks and reshaping the image of women and girls as confident, empowered and in control of their own sexuality.

## **2.5. Theories of oppression:**

Identifying the root causes of women's oppression and proposing frameworks for their liberation has been a central goal of feminist theory. Different feminist perspectives have evolved over time, each providing a different model that sustain gender inequality. While some theories prioritize economic systems others emphasize social hierarchies or cultural narratives. Marxist feminism, radical feminism, and postmodern feminism each present distinct lenses, identifying capitalism, patriarchy, and discourse as structural mechanisms of inequality. Though their focuses vary, they collectively provide a broader comprehension of women's oppression and the diverse strategies for achieving liberation.

### **2.5.1. Marxist feminism:**

Marxist feminism applies Karl Marx's critique of capitalism to analyze the study of gender-based oppression. Marxist feminists, drawing on Marxist theory, contend that women's oppression is perpetuated by capitalism, notably through unpaid domestic labor and undercompensated roles in the workforce. Scholars such as Eisenstein (1979), Elshtain (1981), Hartmann (1979, 1981), and Rowbotham (1979, 1982) have consistently emphasized how capitalism and patriarchy function as interconnected systems that work together to reinforce gender inequality. (Iomire.1989, p,59).

Marxist feminism contends that capitalism's exploitation is seen as not only exploiting wage laborers but also depending on unpaid domestic and reproductive labor. By highlighting capitalism's role in embedding both class and gender inequalities, Marxist feminists advocate for deep systemic transformations that challenge economic hierarchies and redefining the balance between productive and reproductive labor. Marx and Engels (1847) identified class struggle as a fundamental aspect of capitalism, distinguishing two dominant classes, the bourgeoisie, the elite class that accumulate wealth and control production and the proletariat, the working class that must work for wages to survive. As Marx and Engels observed, "The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones." (Marx and Engels 1847). This underscores how capitalism preserved class struggles by dismantling feudal hierarchies by transforming them into a modern economic order.

One of the core tenets of Marxist feminism is that the unpaid labor of women in capitalist systems is both exploited and devalued. Expanding on this idea, Silvia Federici, a leading voice in Marxist feminism, argues that capitalism uses gender roles as a mechanism to sustain women's economic and social oppression. She highlights how capitalism directly profits from this arrangement, stating, "to say that we want wages for housework is to expose the fact that housework is already money for capital, that capital has made and makes money out of our cooking, smiling, fucking." (Revolution at Point Zero, p. 19). This demonstrates capitalism's reliance on the

exploitation of reproductive labor while simultaneously dismissing its value. Federici asserts that the call for wages for housework is not just a demand for financial recognition but a means of uncovering the hidden structures through which capitalism perpetuates women's economic dependence.

Marxist feminism examines how the role of gender ideologies of femininity and masculinity structure capitalist production, questioning the dominance of capitalist value in determining social worth, whether through compensation in wages or the relentless accumulation of surplus value. By highlighting the use value of reproductive labor, Marxist feminists expose how capitalism prioritize economic growth over social welfare. (Elisabeth Armstrong, 2020).

Marx and Engels framed their critique around class struggle, yet their call for a classless society carried implications for gender relations by striving for the abolition of private property and eliminating economic exploitation. Their envisioned system of collective ownership aimed to uphold human dignity and extended its benefits to women. Yet, their analysis did not deeply explore gender oppression a limitation that later Marxist feminists worked to address. Therefore, for Marxist feminists, a genuinely equitable society would redistribute labor, giving equal value to both paid and unpaid work. They believe that dismantling private ownership and class structures, women could attain genuine economic independence as well as full social and political liberation.

### **2.5.2. Radical feminism:**

Radical feminism took shape in the 1960s during the second wave, aiming not only to critique male domination but also to articulate a radically altered vision of society and the state. Its goal is to dismantle patriarchal dominance and the societal gender expectations that maintain women's inequality. The meaning of radical— “relating to the root”—encapsulates radical feminists' conviction that patriarchy is the foundational structure of gender oppression. Meaning that women's subjugation lies in the patriarchal structuring of social roles and institutional mechanisms that privilege male supremacy and patriarchal control.

Historically, radical feminists have long insisted on absolute bodily autonomy, demanding not only the repeal of abortion laws but also for a constitutional amendment that secures women's reproductive freedom. They see laws on reproductive freedom as a strategy to control women's autonomy, perpetuating the belief that their primary function is childbearing and maintaining the patriarchal household. Marriage, as radical feminists argue, is a patriarchal institution that has long reinforced women's position as the property of men. Rejecting traditional marriage structures was a key ideological position with some advocating celibacy as strategic act of resisting patriarchal control. Furthermore, they have been at the forefront of opposing compulsory heterosexuality and the rigid gender norms embedded in social systems.

Acknowledging that oppressive systems would not be dismantled without radical public activism, radical feminists engaged in public resistance, direct confrontation and grassroots organizing. They carried out public demonstrations and direct actions, such as the 1969 Miss America pageant protest against women's commodification, a "pee-in" at Harvard demanding restroom equality, and the occupation of Ladies' Home Journal offices to call for workplace changes that focus on hiring more women of color and eliminating sexist ads. Prioritizing women's safety, they organized taekwondo self-defense programs, arranged escort services to deter street harassment and established shelters rape crisis centers for helping domestic and sexual violence survivors.

Florynce Kennedy and other key radical feminists stressed that feminism must oppose racism, capitalism, and imperialism. They extended their activism to the legal and economic sphere, calling for the commutation of prison sentences for women who defended themselves from domestic violence while pushing for deep economic reforms to dismantle gender-based oppression. Thus, far from being outdated, radical feminism continues to serve as an essential framework for dismantling oppressive structures. Its legacy, grounded in the battle against gender, race, and class oppression, remains a force that unsettles the status quo and energizing contemporary struggles for justice and equality.

### **2.5.3. Postmodern feminism:**



empowers marginalized groups to fight against oppressive systems. Through awareness of sexism, racism, and other injustices, people can oppose deconstruct these oppressive structures.

## 2.6. Conclusion:

The progression of feminist movements and theories has offered a more nuanced comprehension of the nature of women's oppression. While first-wave feminism prioritized legal and political rights, later waves broadened the conversation to include social, economic, and cultural dimensions of oppression. Theories like Marxist feminism exposes how capitalism reinforces gendered oppression, radical feminism confronts patriarchal authority, and postmodern feminism questions rigid gender identities.

By bringing together diverse feminist frameworks we highlight the multifaceted nature of women's oppression and reinforces the necessity of intersectional approach for achieving gender justice. By critically analyzing these perspectives we gain a more profound understanding of enduring pursuit of equality and the urgent need to dismantle systems of oppression.

# Chapter three:



# **Polished into Submission: The Trauma of Becoming a Stepford Wife**

**1. Intruduction:**

Joanna Eberhart's trauma in *The Stepford Wives* uncovers the psychological strategies employed by a system committed to dismantle women's autonomy. Using trauma theory, Marxist feminism, and postmodern feminism, Joanna's disintegration emerges as a reaction to internalized fear and societal oppression. Central to the story is the slow disintegration of Joanna's loss of personal identity, driven by gaslighting, isolation, and emotional neglect. This chapter examines how the conversion of Stepford's women into compliant homemakers goes beyond a metaphorical loss of identity—it embodies a terrifying psychological death, where subjectivity, voice, and consciousness are utterly obliterated.

In this dystopian setting, the chapter aims to presents the intense struggle between female resistance and the patriarchal control that underpins the narrative. Joanna's resistance—marked by her creative art, her bonds with others, and her refusal to conform stands in stark opposition to a societal structure that mandates submission while masking it under the façade of domestic life. Rather than using an overt control; The Stepford community subtly rewires its women, molding their physicality and conduct embody patriarchal expectations. The novel operates as a haunting allegory for the mechanisms of patriarchal power where female's selfhood is deliberately stripped away and resistance is absorbed and obscured. In the final analysis, the novel functions as a psychological study of the ways in which womanhood is destroyed to sustain male supremacy.

## **2.Joanna's Experience of Psychological Trauma:**

In the *Stepford Wives* (1972), Ira Levin's, conjures a flawlessly suburban town that Veils the progressive deterioration and breakdown of the female protagonist, Joanna Eberhart's sanity. Her experience of trauma goes beyond individual pain, exposing the wider societal structures that coerce females into submissive domestic roles.

The journey of Joanna's trauma starts not because of physical aggression, but due to the oppressive and monotonous routines and the ceaseless scrutiny of rigid gender roles in Stepford. Endlessly engaged in cleaning, the Stepford's women are wholly dedicated to domestic chores lacking any indication of intellectual life, mental stimulation, or vitality. Joanna's first impressions in Stepford marked by a muted

emotional withdrawal, creeping anxiety, and a budding suspicion that femininity in Stepford is something staged though she cannot yet fully comprehend.

An apparently casual conversation with Carol Van Sant reveals to Joanna an initial insight into disturbing undercurrents of Stepford's surface. At first glance, their conversation seems like an ordinary exchange but underneath, it harbors a disquieting tone of emotional detachment and the ritualistic expression of femininity. Joanna's increasing sense of alienation in this moment signals the start of Joanna's traumatic disintegration.

"No, I've put it off too long as it is," [Carol] said. "It's all over scuff-marks. And besides, Ted will be going to the Men's Association later on." "Does he go every night?"

"Just about."

Dear God!

"And you stay home and do housework?"

"There's always something or other that has to be done," Carol said. (Levin, 1972, p. 18).

This excerpt uncovers the obsessive, and self-effacing quality of the domestic labor performed by the Stepford wives. Joanna's stunned internal reaction—Dear God! — reflects a state of cognitive dissonance, a key psychological response to the disorienting circumstances that Judith Herman (1992) links to trauma. Herman explains that traumatic typically begins when the mind tries to understand an environment that that defies both logical and emotional reasoning.

Joanna is unable to make sense of Carol's upbeat submission to domestic duties while her husband indulges in nightly social freedom, indicating a disturbing discrepancy between Carol's actions and the collective social structure of Stepford. Viewed through a feminist psychological perspective, Carol's conduct demonstrates the ingrained practice of patriarchal femininity. Her unresisting submission to domestic chores, carried out with robotic efficiency, embodies the deep absorption of

patriarchal ideals. Joanna's growing rift with her neighbors heightens cognitive dissonance and activates what Bessel van der Kolk (2014) calls "thwarted self-agency", a precursor to trauma that occurs when an individual is hindered from responding to threats with instinctive impulses.

Bobbie Marlowe's arrival marks a pivotal moment in Joanna's emotional journey. With her unkempt nature, political awareness, and humorous personality, Bobbie, serves as both an ally and a safeguard for Joanna. Herman (1992) highlights the need for "restoring connection" during recovery from trauma, a need that Bobbie addresses by playing a key role in Joanna's social sphere. Bobbie's admiration for Joanna's chaotic home and feminist views provides her with a temporary sense of respite.

"What a pleasure to see a messy kitchen!" Bobbie said. "It's good, it's very good. Congratulations" (Levin, 1972, p. 40).

Through a Marxist feminist perspective, Bobbie and Joanna's examination of Stepford's gendered labor division uncovers the capitalists and control over women's reproductive labor. Silvia Federici (2004) posits that women's subordination is a cornerstone of capitalist structures, and the "Stepfordization" of women is the inevitable result of this process of commodification. This is epitomized by the Men's Association which is hidden in secrecy and wielding power, serving as a place where women altered to become more productive and efficient wives.

Postmodern feminism as discussed by Haraway (1991), disrupts the notion of static identities and rigid binary distinctions. The shared resistance of Joanna and Bobbie poses a threat to Stepford's dominant structure, suggesting that identity is changeable and socially constructed, rather than biologically imposed. This ability to reimagine femininity makes her a perilous figure. Bobbie's abrupt change into a docile, housework-obsessed wife—transforming into the very women they had once opposed—deeply destabilizes Joanna's psyche. This change is emblematic of patriarchal dominance while also being the disintegration of Joanna's last psychological protection. Judith Herman's trauma theory suggests that absence of a reliable ally can provoke a resurgence of helplessness and powerlessness, fundamental features of post-traumatic stress.

Bobbie's abrupt alteration mirrors betrayal trauma, where what was once a reliable source of safety becomes a source of terror.

Joanna shook her head. "Bobbie," she said, "I— Don't you see what's happened? Whatever's around here—it's got you, the way it got Charmaine!"

Bobbie smiled at her. "Nothing's got me," she said. "There's nothing around. That was a lot of nonsense. Stepford's a fine healthful place to live."

"You—don't want to move anymore?"

"Oh no," Bobbie said. "That was nonsense too. I'm perfectly happy here."

The unsettling unease in this moment lies not only in Bobbie's words but also in her robotic, monotonous quality. Her new identity mirrors the programmed domesticity of the other Stepford wives, an unsettling fracture in Joanna's grasp on reality. Joanna's dread of Bobbie's transformation goes beyond concern for her friend, but a terrifying realization that she might face the same fate. Bobbie represented the reflection through Joanna recognized her most authentic self—a woman passionate about creativity, independence, and activism. Losing that reflection leaves her vulnerable and susceptible to the same outcome.

She's changed, Walter! She doesn't talk the same, she doesn't think the same—and I'm not going to wait around for it to happen to me!".

Joanna's psychological turmoil evolves into an overwhelming sense of existential horror: in Stepford survival necessitates absolute submission. Her detachment extends beyond her relationships as she becomes distanced from reality itself, illustrating trauma-induced a hallmark of derealization and self-fragmentation (Herman, 1992).

Her spiral ends with the heart-wrenching realization that Walter, her husband has conspired with the Men's Association to erase her identity. The apex of Joanna's trauma comes when she uncovers Walter's name listed in a book on robotics. The true horror stems not only from the fear of being replaced but from the devastating realization that her closest confidant is part of the conspiracy.

Joanna's defiance persists to the final confrontation, even though the end is already predetermined. The "inescapability of the situation" (Herman, 1992), a core element in trauma theory. Joanna's final act of defiance is marked by a profound sense of helplessness and the awareness struggle has been futile. From a Marxist feminist lens, Joanna's fate represents the ultimate retribution for her challenge to conformity. Rather than accepting her opposition, the system reshapes her to fulfill its requirements. In the context of postmodern feminism, Joanna's authentic subjectivity is replaced by an artificial hyper-feminine facade, manufactured to satisfy male gratification (Butler, 1990). In the haunting final scene, Joanna having become a Stepford wife, shops with an unnatural, mechanical fluidity. The transformation is absolute; trauma has triumphed where defiance faltered.

### **3. The Transformation of Stepford Wives as Psychological Death:**

Levin's *The Stepford Wives* (1972) presents a dark satire of suburban life, where women lose their individuality and identities are erased and replaced with artificial, submissive counterparts. Although this process does not physically fatal, it annihilates the mind, demise—wiping out women's autonomy, freedom, and self-determination.

As trauma theorist Judith Herman (1992) asserts, psychological trauma core lies in the loss of selfhood, severs emotional bonds, and one's sense of autonomy. The women of Stepford suffer this disruption not by physical harm, but by steadily wiping out their personal agency and authentic selves.

As Joanna begins to interact with the Stepford wives, she quickly picks up on the unsettling sameness among them: "the women she had met in the past few days, the ones in the nearby houses, were pleasant and helpful enough, but they seemed completely absorbed in their household duties" (Levin, 1972, p. 12). Their complete

devotion to domestic chores, stripped of passion or distinctiveness, hints at a deeper emotional suppression and psychological void. According to van der Kolk (2014), trauma severs individuals from their emotional continuity and cognitive selves. In *Stepford*, this severance is organized, leaving the women emotionally dead while their bodies remain functioning.

Through the perspective of Marxist feminism, the *Stepford* wives are dehumanized into laboring bodies, whose entire existence is to manage the household and bolster the male ego. Operating as a pillar of patriarchal capitalism, the Men's Association, convert women into unremunerated agents of domestic labor. Federici (2004) contends that capitalist system is thrives on harnessing and exploiting women's domestic contributions. Carol Van Sant's monotonous focus on domestic duties like cleaning and child-rearing highlights the unnatural pressure placed on women to submit to rigid domestic expectations: "There's always something or other that has to be done" (Levin, 1972, p.18). Joanna's startled reaction—"Dear God!"—signals her immediate awareness of the women's-imposed servitude. Their transformation underscores the capitalist ideal of femininity: submissive, aesthetically pleasing, and compliant.

From a postmodern feminist standpoint, the wives are overblown portrayals of womanhood —manufactured identities that reflect a constructed ideal without any authentic origin. These wives no longer possess human flaws; they're manufactured roles created to appease male gratification. Joanna is disturbed the eerie nature of Bobbie's change when she and Dave came back from weekend: Bobbie had had her hair done and was absolutely beautiful (Levin, 1972, p.78).

Don't they look great?" Joanna said. "Bobbie didn't even look that good at the party (Levin, 1972, p.80).

Bobbie is no longer her authentic self, has become a fabricated version of a woman, invoking Freud's (2003) uncanny, where the familiar becomes unfamiliar. Though the wives maintain the form of women, their essence has vanished. As Joanna tries to understand this horror, her own sense of reality begins to fracture.

The radical feminist standpoint examines how institutionalized patriarchy enforces structural oppression and systemic control over female bodies and regulates their autonomy. According to them the denial of women's sexual and intellectual freedom is one of patriarchy's primary tools of suppression. This patriarchal control in Stepford becomes a tangible force. The women's ability to resist has been intentionally extinguished. When Joanna begs the altered Bobbie, "Bobbie, will you please tell me what happened last weekend?"

"Bobbie, you're not you any more! Can't you see that? You've become like the others!" (Levin, 1972, p.92), captures the emotional devastation of losing a trusted ally to ideological erasure. As Judith Herman (1992) emphasizes, trauma's roots are often stems from relational betrayal. Bobbie's shift is not simply eerie; it is an intimate betrayal that severs Joanna's sense of solidarity and plunging her into a bewildered isolation unable to voice her reality.

Joanna's confrontation with Bobbie, her sole remaining confidante, stands out as one of the novel's most harrowing scenes. Bobbie's unnervingly collected reply—"Of course I'm me. I simply realized that I was too careless and indulgent, and now I'm doing my job properly" (Levin, 1972, p.92) indicates her complete transformation into becoming a docile Stepford wife. This moment for Joanna is more than just a loss—it marks a deep rupture in her psychological and emotional realm: the disappearance of Bobbie's true self signals the connection, selfhood, and the fight against oppression. This instance reflects what trauma theorist Judith Herman (1992) outlines as the fragmentation of trust and intimacy—a distinguishing symptom of traumatic experience.

As Joanna's emotional anchor, Bobbie gave Joanna the resilience to face the pressures of Stepford's conformity. Through a Marxist feminist lens, Bobbie's reference to "doing my job conscientiously" illustrates how household responsibilities are evaluated based on capitalist labor values. As Federici (2004) points out, capitalism masks the crucial role of household labor by framing it as a natural duty, justifying the absence of acknowledgment and compensation. Bobbie's evolution from a critical, vocal feminist to a dutiful, subservient homemaker illustrates the ideal under



capitalism: a quiet, unpaid worker whose value is determined by her ability to submit and produce.

From the standpoint of postmodern feminism, Bobbie's shifts into a hyperreal representation of femininity, losing her humanity and turning into an artificial construct. Her statement, "Of course I'm me," embodies Baudrillard's (1994) theory of simulacra, a replica without a real foundation. Though Bobbie retains a human exterior—her spontaneity and dissent—has vanished. Joanna's shocked reaction encapsulates a postmodern epistemological rupture, where authenticity and selfhood are dissolve into cultural fabrications of womanhood.

Radical feminism highlights the brutality of this transformation —Bobbie's shift is not self-determined, but imposed by patriarchal force materialized through the Men's Association's conversion of independent women with compliant imitations. They maintained that patriarchy sustains itself by extinguishing women's inner spirits.

Bobbie's refusal to acknowledge her change illustrates the adoption of patriarchal logic— she interprets her previous authenticity as "sloppy" and her new obedience as "conscientious." This is an illustration of cognitive distortion in trauma theory, where survivors begin to see themselves through the values imposed by their oppressors. Her new persona is a reflection of Stepford's logic, where deviation is seen as a disorder and conformity as a moral ideal.

This pivotal scene represents the climax of the novel's horror, underscoring that the changes in Stepford are not just physical; they represent a complete erasure of identity. The idea of psychological death encapsulates the wives' fate: their bodies continue to function, but their inner selves and mental existence is erased. This moment of realization signals the tipping point of Joanna's trauma, foreshadowing her psychological disintegration.

At its core, the novel exposes the horrifying result of erasing women's agency favor of patriarchal power. Seen through trauma theory and feminism, Stepford reveals itself as an apparatus of control that erases female subjectivity and kill women not through physical harm, but by psychological suppression and mental coercion.

#### **4.The Struggle Between Female Resistance and Forced Compliance:**

Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* portrays a haunting depiction of the disturbing tension between women's attempts to resist patriarchal authority and the institutional forces that aim to suppress them. As the protagonist, Joanna Eberhart embodies the core of this conflict, serving as a figure of independence, creativity, and a deep need for genuine bonds with other women. Joanna refuses to forsake her personal ambitions and sense of self sets the catalyst for her resistance. As a budding photographer, her artistic work serves as a striking representation of her individuality and resistance to traditional gender norms. Joanna stands apart from the other women of Stepford, who consumed by household chores.

As her distrust of their programmed-like behavior deepens, she articulates her fear in a haunting observation: «They never stop, these Stepford wives... They work like robots all their lives.”

This comment draws attention to the soulless, lifeless existence of the Stepford wives, while revealing Joanna's first recognition of the controlling system shape their lives. Joanna's choice to start a women's consciousness-raising group with Bobbie serves as direct act of resistance against the entrenched system of control. It goes beyond mere social gathering—it's a conscious effort to awaken political and psychological consciousness in a community where such discourse is deliberately silenced.

With a strategic intention, Joanna and Bobbie dedicate a morning to visiting the local women seeking to foster self-awareness and resistance: “the two of them, speaking in planned ambiguities, might create the encouraging suggestion of a phalanx of women with room for one more. (Levin, 1972, p,30). While seemingly modest, their strategy is profoundly revolutionary—they strive to create a foundation of mutual support bound by unity and resistance, but instead of engagement, their efforts are met with chilling lack of response and a deep sense of alienation. The other women stay aloof and comfortably confined within their domestic routines. This chilling silence triggers Bobbie's frustrated cry: “Jee-zus!” she exclaimed, aggressively driving up Short Ridge Hill. “Something fishy is going on here! We're in the Town That Time Forgot!”.

(Levin, 1972, p,31). Her emotional eruption embodies the growing dread that their resistance is being swallowed and nullified by an invisible mechanism of oppression they cannot yet grasp.

Joanna's connection with Bobbie Markowe acts as a stabilizing force in sustaining her resistance. United, they carve out a safe space of mutual trust that enables Joanna to rigid the town's oppressive homogeneity. Joanna is left reeling as Bobbie, once a closest confidante in resistance abruptly transforms into a disturbingly docile demeanor, preoccupied with domestic duties. This shift in Bobbie signals the system's insidious power, isolating Joanna in her own escalating awareness and resistance. Joanna's horror intensifies as she grasps that the situation in Stepford far worse than she had ever envisioned. The terror is compounded not just from Bobbie's loss, but in the chilling realization that no woman can escape this brutal transformation. Joanna's deepening solitude mirrors the way patriarchal structures fragment female solidarity and exacerbates susceptibility. With Bobbie's loss, Joanna's resistance starts to unravel.

As Joanna's desperation to break free from Stepford's intensifies, she confronts her husband Walter in one final act of resistance against the deliberate assault on her personal agency. In a final assertion of agency, she insists on the truth and declares, "I'm not going to stay here another day." Her accusatory confrontation—"Is that why Stepford was the only place to move? Did somebody pass the message to you? Take her to Stepford, there's something in the air there; she'll change in four months."—(Levin, 1972, p,89) exposes her dawning understanding that their move was never a random choice but a carefully orchestrated scheme aimed at dismantling her authentic identity. Walter's detached reply— You want to move because you're afraid you're going to 'change'; and I think you're being irrational and—a little hysterical" (Levin, 1972, p,89), is a clear example of gaslighting, reflecting a broader patriarchal pattern of suppressing women by undermining their emotional and psychological credibility. This scene captures the core conflict of the novel: Joanna's resistance is reframed by patriarchal domination as a sign of mental fragility.

One of the most chilling and symbolically scene in *The Stepford Wives* transpires when Joanna is swapped for a robot, a mechanical replica meant to wipe out her resistance and embody flawless compliance.

While never explicitly depicted, this moment is vividly implied in the novel's haunting concluding image: Joanna appears in the supermarket, but she is no longer the person she once was. This altered "Joanna" is unsettlingly serene, impeccably groomed, and entirely devoid of ambition or critical thought. In this short exchange, the robotic Joanna disavows the very passions that once made her who she was.

Joanna's final comment, "Oh no, I don't do much photography anymore," marks her complete change. When Ruthanne expresses astonishment, Joanna adds, "I wasn't especially talented, and I was wasting a lot of time." Housework's enough for me. I used to feel I had to have other interests, but I'm more at ease with myself now. I'm much happier too, and so is my family. That's what counts, isn't it?"— (Levin, 1972, p,121), this mirrors the mechanical repetition of patriarchal values where female's worth is confined to her function in the home and her service to those around her. The ending represents the complete domination of forced compliance over resistance. Joanna, who fought to assert her independence, is now replaced by the submissive role she once opposed. Her fate unveils a harsh reality— while resistance is bold, it is fragile without the strength of collective unity.

### **5.The Stepford Wives as a Metaphor for Patriarchal Oppression:**

The novel *The Stepford Wives* by Ira Levin explores the disturbing allegory of patriarchy and the societal tools designed to erase women's independence. The narrative initially centers on Joanna Eberhart, a free-spirited and self-reliant artist, who relocates to the well-manicured and peaceful town of Stepford with her family. Despite its calm suburban façade, Stepford masks a chilling reality—the men are systematically replacing their wives with obedient machines engineered to fulfill stereotypical duties of traditional womanhood. Levin's narrative illustrates how patriarchal power operates—by labeling female dissent as hysteria, restricting women to homemaking duties, obliterating their sense of self, instilling fear to enforce obedience.

Joanna's story, viewed through feminist theory, reflects the broader female struggle to assert their identities in an environment that demands conformity and submission. She rejects the conventional ideal of domesticity, and prioritizes her creative and intellectual endeavors. Her increasing unease with both the town and its women is evident as she comments, ""They never stop, these Stepford wives. They work like robots all their lives." (Levin, 1972, p.69). As Bobbie, once vibrant and defiant, starts to fixate on domestic chores, Joanna's suspicions intensify. According to feminist theorist bell hooks (2000), patriarchy reinforces its dominance by conditioning women to accept that their worth and purpose is measured by household submission, supportive caregiving and emotional labor. Joanna's attempt to start a women's group with Bobbie to discuss women's rights and political topics is received with superficial politeness and social exclusion. Obsessed with domestic chores and ensuring their husbands' every need, the Stepford wives exemplify how conformity and societal expectations reinforce female obedience.

In *Women and Madness* (2005), Phyllis Chesler offers key insight into how Joanna's growing consciousness is portrayed as irrational or unstable. Instead of offering support, Walter responds to Joanna's anxieties by dismissing them as irrational and hysterical: "You want to move because you're afraid you're going to 'change'; and I think you're being irrational and—a little hysterical." (P89). Chesler contends that women who defy traditional gender roles are commonly seen as mentally ill, one that tragically manifests in Joanna's plight. The men position her genuine concerns about Stepford as paranoia or emotional instability, giving them the opportunity to tighten their grip while keeping up the false semblance of control.

Through a Marxist feminist interpretation, the novel sheds light on the economic and labor dynamics that structure the characters' experiences. In *Materialist Feminism*, Hennessy and Ingraham (1997) highlight how capitalism relies on women's unpaid domestic labor, consequently sustaining and perpetuating gender hierarchies. They argue that "women's housework—feeding, laundering, cleaning, educating—is indispensable to wage work because in doing this unpaid labor, women produce the living human beings who enter the wage sector," (p.12), thus reinforcing gender-based

labor inequalities and facilitating the persistent marginalization of women in both domestic and economic domains. In her eerie final form, Joanna's replacement—who gently asserts, “Housework’s enough for me... I’m more at ease with myself now,” illustrates the ideal capitalist commodity: a docile laborer devoid of personal drive or social consciousness.

The husbands’ goal goes beyond obedience; they demand total ownership. By dehumanizing their wives and reducing them to emotionless servants, they mirror the capitalist logic of commercialization. Postmodern feminist theory, particularly Donna Haraway’s work in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, expands on this metaphor in a more profound interpretation. Haraway (1991) proposes that the distinctions between human and machine are socially constructed, and that gender is not an inherent trait but rather a series of performed actions.

In a literal form, the robot wives exemplify this performative of gender, constructed to epitomize an idealized femininity—gracious, submissive, housebound, and relentlessly joyful. This manufactured femininity echoes the impossible standards imposed on women. Joanna’s robotic replacement, with her pleasant smile and the renunciation of her passion for photography make her the embodiment of the submissive feminine archetype. The Stepford's men actions go beyond simply dominating their spouses—they are manufacturing a version of womanhood to conform patriarchal mold.

Joanna's psychological unraveling can be better illuminated through trauma theory, drawing on the work of Judith Herman (1992) and Bessel van der Kolk (2014). As Joanna faces isolation, gaslighting manipulation by her husband, her emotional resilience starts to deteriorate. The defining moment occurs when Joanna faces Bobbie, who has been transformed this scene crystallizes the outward expression of her escalating psychological fears. Bobbie grins sweetly while holding a knife and says, "Come on... the men are waiting." (Levin, 1972, p,118), in that moment, Joanna understands she has lost her final ally, leaving her utterly alone.

The disintegration of Joanna’s reality reflects the effects of trauma with Herman pointing out how trauma entails the loss of control, connection, and meaning— each of

which Joanna experiences throughout her time in Stepford. The novel closes with a quietly horrifying image, Joanna's duplicate drifts through the supermarket, exuding a hollow charm and synthetic cheer. This goes beyond erasure; it's a full-scale hijacking and reconstruction of who she is. Her defiance is not destroyed but overwritten—replaced by artificial contentment. Through this, *The Stepford Wives* shows how patriarchal control doesn't simply obliterate resistance; it reconfigures it, remodels it, and obscures its roots beneath a façade of domestic bliss.

## **6.Conclusion:**

Joanna's psychological breakdown highlights a broader feminist critique of the emotional, social, and existential consequences of patriarchal oppression. Her trauma is shaped by systemic forces that weaponize conformity, gaslighting, and isolation to break down female resistance. The transformation of the Stepford wives into docile, lifeless figures represents a symbolic death—the erasure of thought, creativity, and identity in devotion to a commodified, performative standard of femininity. Viewed through this perspective, Stepford transforms from a fictional town to an allegorical space where patriarchal power is maintained by the manipulation of minds and the eradication of personal identity.

By analyzing Joanna's resistance to compulsory submission and the final silencing of her voice, this chapter explores how *The Stepford Wives* reveals the covert methods patriarchy neutralizes opposition. Joanna's downfall transcends individual tragedy—it reflects how systemic processes convert dissent into passive compliance. Thus, the story frames patriarchy as an external force and profoundly embedded psychological trauma.

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