
Resistance and Forgiveness: Exploring Patriarchy and Oppression in Megan Giddings' *The Women Could Fly* (2022)

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Abstract:

This research delves into the themes of patriarchy, oppression, and forgiveness within Megan Giddings' novel, *The Women Could Fly* (2022), examining how they intersect within the context of capitalist-led society. Drawing on feminist and Marxist analyses, the study explores how patriarchy, operating within a capitalist framework, systematically marginalizes and oppresses women in general, and black women in particular. Through an analysis of Giddings' dystopian narrative, the paper elucidates the ways in which female characters resist patriarchal oppression while also grappling with forgiveness in the face of systemic injustice. It discusses the complex interplay between power dynamics, gender relations, and capitalist structures, highlighting the ongoing struggle for women's empowerment within a society that privileges men and perpetuates inequality. It also recognizes how issues related to both women and nature interconnect in such narratives associating supernatural powers to emancipation endeavors. The paper confirms, as portrayed in the contemporary narrative under study, that patriarchy continues to be the dominant power in capitalism.

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1. Introduction

Women's empowerment, specifically that of black women, remains a utopian endeavor with some internal and external forces contributing to this process. Throughout this research, we attempt to discuss how capitalist led patriarchy controls power and contributes to the oppression of black women illustrating from Megan Giddings's novel *The Women Could Fly* (2022). The paper will shed light on women's fight against the patriarchal oppression expressed through dystopian writings to portray a process of resistance and forgiveness.

Contemporary societies remain constructed upon a capitalist system that is still under the control of patriarchy. This patriarchal influence perpetuates a systematic cycle that dismisses and disregards the roles and choices of women, resulting in their neglect and marginalization (Hayward, 2017). Black women are victims of targeted sexist and racist oppressions. The question of whether women can live empowered within a patriarchal society elicits two parallel and tentative answers. The first answer leans towards a negative outlook, highlighting the historical and ongoing obstacles black women face in fully realizing their potential and achieving their goals within a society that privileges men and white women. The second answer takes a more positive outlook by exploring the potential for women to create alternative narratives and escape into fictional worlds where they can envision life in utopian societies.

Through literature and fiction, black women can shape and arrange an entire system that empowers them, provides support, and grants them full liberation. By drawing this comparison, we gain insight into how Megan Giddings navigates her own society, as well as how her choices and aspirations

challenge the capitalist government. *The Women Could Fly* (2022) delves into various events that depict female characters oppressed by this system. Patriarchy continues to be the dominant power in capitalism as portrayed in this contemporary narrative.

In “Woman on the Edge of a Genre: The Feminist Dystopias of Marge Piercy”, M. Keith Booker discusses gender equality, political statement, social criticism, and the political commitment in two compared books by Marge Piercy: *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *He, She, and It* (Booker, 1994). They both reinforce their political statements with innovative literary techniques generating dialogic energy from various social discourses and genres. It analyses the two novels concluding that the first is truly a utopian work that idealizes future feminist utopia with the contradiction of Piercy’s contemporary America. The second is a rather dystopian narrative focusing on the technological advancement and their impact on society. The point of this article is to compare both books by dealing with their main topics: technology, dystopia, and feminism; however, it does not relate it to the historical background that connects to the ecosystem and limits itself to the main concepts.

Researchers have extensively discussed this issue in relation to patriarchy, power, and capitalism. *Ecofeminist Natures*, by Noël Sturgeon, examines the development of ecofeminism from the 1890s antimilitarist movement to the 1990s internationalist ecofeminism (Sturgeon, 2016). The writer explores the ecofeminist notion of gender and its relationship with race and the ecological world surrounding them. She shifts ideas from the historical investigation of certain manifestations from the US to a broader analysis of international environmental politics and the importance of its review calling for a modification of a collapsed system.

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Marxism and Feminism deals with how global events varying from economic crises in capitalist societies to social unrest and militarization have oppressive implications on women in general. It examines the role of women in the struggle against oppression and exploitation within a patriarchal society that prioritizes and is ruled by men. It combines Marxism and feminism to provide a contemporary analysis on various issues, re-evaluating past debates and addressing the central question of how to understand the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism, and how to envision a feminist project that emancipates both women and society (Mojab & Carpenter, 2019).

Society is an instrument wielded by the ruling class, which includes men or the class with the most economic power (patriarchy), deliberately perpetuating economic inequality and political imbalance. According to Marx, "politics" is merely a complex mechanism through which those in positions of power continue to rule and maintain their social dominance. Therefore, it views politics as a means of domination and the perpetuation of the exploitative capitalist system. The domination and exploitation of both women and nature are rooted in similar hierarchical and oppressive structures. In *Women's Oppression Today: the Marxist/Feminist Encounter* (2014), Michele Barrett attempts at constructing a Marxist analysis of the main relationship shared between women's oppression and class exploitation in a capitalist system.

Barrett argues that a feminist analysis of "culture" is imperative today. Her engagements with aesthetics and subjectivity have proved to be the cutting edge of Marxist Feminism. She states that feminism "points in a different direction, emphasizing precisely the relations of gender — largely speaking, of the oppression of women by men — that Marxism has tended to pass over in silence." (Barrett, 2014, p. 48). In fact, the importance of recognizing and addressing the

unique dynamics of gender relations stresses that understanding and challenging gender-based oppression is essential for achieving social justice.

2. Resisting Patriarchy

Patriarchy is a social system in which men hold primary power and predominance over women and other marginalized groups excluding them from decision-making and political and economic opportunities. In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir argues that patriarchy lacks natural property, it is a social construct that is perpetuated by social norms and cultural practices (de Beauvoir, 1949). With more social and economic dominance, men control political leadership and influence moral authority further empowering male-centered dominance.

The Women Could Fly portrays patriarchy as a powerful oppressive source which limits women's potentials and undermines their abilities. This novel offers a powerful commentary on the intersections of race, gender, and power in the lives of black women. It illustrates how patriarchy works in a society where oppression is the major factor that impacts the lives of black women in multiple ways, limiting their potential and exploiting them and practicing gender-based violence. The pervasive nature of patriarchy in society limits the aspirations and opportunities of women keeping them needy and dependent on men.

In the narrative, women are expected to be submissive, domestic, and obedient while men have the right to pursue their dreams and think with no limitations, be ambitious and dominant, and live fully and freely without being misjudged or punished. This could be summarized in three main points as illustrated in the novel: gender discrimination, conformity to racism, and violence and abuse towards women. In this sense, Barrett states that "deterioration in women's position at work has also followed

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class lines, being more marked for manual work” (Barrett, 2014, pp. 22-23). She further explains that division of labor is accentuated by sex discrimination. That is, black women are not only treated unequally and inferiorly domestically but that this exact manner of oppression impacts their professional world.

The protagonist in *The Women Could Fly*, Josephine (Jo), is a courageous woman who finds herself in a continuous battle against discrimination in a society that belittles her. Her father, her teacher and the men and white women that surround her constantly remind her of her limited opportunities as a young unmarried black woman. Despite this continuous discouragement, she refuses to renounce her dreams and persists in living and defying the patriarchal norms. The narrative portrays patriarchy as a pervasive force that limits women's potentials and reinforces gender stereotypes. However, it also shows that women have the power to resist and challenge the system and it is with this determination that they achieve dreams and break free from all limitations.

Jo experiences conformity to racism and patriarchy through her relationship with her white father. Her efforts to break free from social norms are constantly hindered by the system which is dominated by men who dismiss her dreams and deny her opportunities. Jo's father, a traditionalist and conformist man, disapproves of her way of living, and insists that she should focus on practical pursuits. On her 28th birthday, he phones her to remind her that finding a husband is a social obligation at this age and an existential need for a black woman. He essentially spoke of the importance of stability, founding a family and being guided by a husband reminding her of what she is, “he cleared his throat” and said: “Jo, you're Black” (Giddings, 2022, p. 12). When Jo was accused of witchcraft after she had disappeared for a while, her father abandons her declaring he wouldn't recognize her as a daughter unless she conforms to authorities. This incident stands as a witness of a justified abuse

and deliberate violence inflicted upon her by patriarchal agents. Jo was also subjected to psychological manipulation with the authorities' purpose of breaking her and making her conform to social standards. However, despite the punishment she endured, Jo remained resilient and forgiving.

Forgiveness within the feminist movement became a central concern to counter violent acts. Some feminists have advocated for forgiveness as a means of personal healing and evolvment; however, others prioritize accountability and justice. The concept of forgiveness is diverse and depends on individual choices, goals, and experiences. In the early stages of feminist movement, forgiveness was not a dominant endeavor; instead, feminists were mainly focused on demanding equal rights and challenging the patriarchal system and its structure which keeps oppressing women and marginalized groups. However, progressively and through the evolution of feminism, different strands of feminist thoughts emerged, and certain feminists started to embrace and explore the concept of forgiveness as a means of healing, moving forward, and evolving.

This idea explained that forgiveness might be a tool leading to personal liberation and empowerment allowing individuals to let go of anger and resentment hindering their progress. Thus, believing that forgiveness is a way to break free from the cycle of oppression can liberate individuals from the emotional burden of anger, resentment, and bitterness. Feminists could then embrace the idea of positive change and collective progress (Norlock, 2008). "Restorative justice", one of the main concepts emerging from the belief to forgive, aims at addressing harm and conflict by focusing on healing and reconciliation rather than punishment. Through this framework, such act can play a role in fostering an understanding between oppressed and oppressors, or victims and perpetrators when the relationship

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takes a violent turn. Restorative justice disrupts the cycles of violence and restores comfort (Norlock, 2008).

In *The Women Could Fly*, Jo chose reconciliation over punishment as depicted throughout the narrative. Although she had been condemned to death over unproven acts of witchcraft, she was able to forgive her father, neighbors, and authorities in an ultimate act of self-discovery. Jo embarked on this profound journey of self-fulfillment and healing in a dystopian world plagued by an oppressive system and a conformist father. She often found herself struggling between the weight of her troubled past and the influence of her liberating future. Jo realized that forgiveness did not absolve her father of his past actions, it just freed her from the bitterness, disappointment, and hatred she faced through the abandonment and neglect. Through forgiveness, she could finally break the chains of her own suffering and set a better mental and spiritual state for her own.

The novel explores the transformative power of forgiveness in the face of oppression and personal pain. Jo's journey from pain to peace becomes a testament to the resilience of human spirit. Through embracing compassion and understanding, Jo breaks the chains of her past and paves the way for freedom. The novel serves as a poignant reminder that forgiveness has the power of creating a world where redemption is possible even in the most oppressive circumstances.

3. Feminist Allies

The narrative is also a testament to male feminist alliances. In *The Women Could Fly*, not all men perpetuate patriarchy. In fact, some men actively work to dismantle the patriarchal system with its dominating power and privileges. These men are known as feminist male allies. They are individuals within a society who support principles of feminism and take women's defense and seek to challenge the patriarchal structure and the systematic oppression of women. These men recognize that male dominance has historically led to the marginalization of women,

and they work to insure and lead towards a better system where women are treated equally. These allies understand that patriarchy perpetuates gender-based violence, discrimination, and oppression. They seek to unlearn the harmful patterns of thought and action that inherent in patriarchy and acknowledge the intersections of gender with other forms of oppression such as racism, transphobia, and ableism. They strive to support marginalized groups and women. These men challenge harmful societal norms such as toxic masculinity, rape culture, and the objectification of women (Tarrant, 2009).

Male feminist allies are men who actively support feminist and work towards the construction of a society where equality and fairness are institutionalized. They recognize social, economic, and political disadvantages that women and marginalized groups face and take action to address and abolish them. Male feminist allies understand that feminist concepts would benefit everyone including men as the pressure and assumptions put on males would be served equally and divided based on purpose and rationality (Eddo-Lodge, 2020). This involves self-reflection, education, and action because it requires acknowledgement and unlearning the biases spread from birth thus challenging harmful attitudes in oneself and others. It involves advocating for women's rights in a way of supporting feminist causes and working on creating an equal and just society (Eddo-Lodge, 2020).

In *The Women Could Fly*, the male character Preston disapproves of patriarchy as he becomes conscious of the negative impact it has on women, and precisely black women's lives. Certainly, its impact on the life of the one he fell in love with, Jo, is most conceivable. He acts contrarily to the generally exhibited behaviors and attitudes that reinforce traditional gender roles such as expecting women to fulfil traditional domestic

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duties assuming that they are more superior to women in general in certain or many domains. He does not adhere to traditional expectations that reinforce dominance over women. Preston never engaged in sexual harassment or assault, only used his influence to affect other men to act over inequality when Jo needed help, and always acknowledged the perspectives of marginalized groups and oppressed women.

Preston was a male character who owned power and authority since he was extremely rich and luxurious. As described by Jo, “When I knocked on the door, he answered it by handing me a glass of whisky and leading me to the terrible black leather couch he owned. Every time I saw it, I thought oh, ick, because it was obviously bought to say, Look I have some money, look I am a desirable man as described in men’s fashion magazines” (Giddings, 2022, pp. 18-19). Preston challenged and tried to dismantle patriarchal structures and attitudes he noticed happening around Jo. He showed and provided support to Jo’s voice and leadership nature as she was advocating for policies and laws that promote gender equality. He examined his own beliefs and behaviors that were rooted in him from childhood to ensure that they align with feminist policies. “He had done that man thing where he was sure if we talked to the right people, if we filed complaints, talked to a lawyer, we could challenge the system from within” (Giddings 191). Preston examined the situation out of experience. He witnessed what the patriarchal government could do to the person he loved the most and stood against it. The damaging effects of their actions and the oppression and discrimination they practiced on black women made him resent and disapprove of patriarchy.

Preston could see how patriarchy affected Jo’s social, financial, and relational life, and the way she endured and suffered from its prejudices, misjudgments, and the brutal treatment she had to endure on multiple occasions. The intentional feedback Jo received from her teacher and father and

the harsh punishment and psychological torture she had to undergo after returning from the island are a few examples of the discriminatory treatment she suffered from as a black unmarried woman. Preston observed how patriarchal beliefs and practices limit women's opportunities and freedom and how they perpetuate gender-based discrimination and violence. He also recognized the intersectionality of patriarchy and the oppression it practices such as racism, and classism to further marginalize groups and oppressed women.

Jo and Preston share a deep connection; not only at the intimate but also at the intellectual, moral, and spiritual levels. The path diverged when Jo went to the island. However, Preston never stopped exploring his romantic thoughts and feelings towards Jo. He is an important figure in her life serving as the grounding force and a source of emotional support for her as she goes through all the challenges and oppression of being a black woman.

He provided an unconditional emotional support whenever Jo needed it. Preston became Jo's safe space where she could express her frustrations, experiences, and thoughts. Throughout the narrative, he gave her his full attention providing comfort and understanding. He was also depicted as her true natural love. Preston expressed an unconditional love towards Jo and remained steadfast throughout her absence. He loved her not because of her skin color or her active sexuality, but because of her pure soul and child spirit. Preston valued and validated her in a way that was shown through the support he provided for her when she was submitted to the punishments, torture and at last her execution remaining the only supportive and affective of all her connections throughout the hardest events up till the end.

Preston serves as a reminder of home to Jo as well. He saved her from the government, solitude and punishment and

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provided a physical and emotional shelter for her, a place where she could go and be safe at. Through this, Jo maintained a sense of connection, protection, and vitality where she could navigate her full thoughts about the future and her security specially after becoming an outcast in her society. He reminded her of her old passionate life before enduring the physical and mental torture and encouraged her to confront her fears and uncertainties. Preston helped Jo reconnect with her old self and identity as she embraced her past, future, and her ethical background. While she was living in a patriarchal society, in the place where there is inequality and oppression, Preston reminded her of the authenticity and originality of her color and roots and helped her navigate these complexities. He encouraged her to be true to herself reaffirming identity. Through their enduring connection, Preston became a pillar of support for Jo offering her love, affection, understanding, and a sense of belongingness. His presence in her life defies all social, gender, and race stereotypes.

Characters who disapprove of patriarchy believe in gender equality and actively work to challenge and change the traditional gender roles and stereotypes. As Preston recognizes the ways patriarchal system hurt both women and men and seeks to break the chains and work towards an equal behavioral system to create a more equitable society. Preston rejected a long tradition of conformism and patriarchy that with all the capitalist means in his possession could never defeat.

4. Nature and Faith

Feminist environmentalism confirms that women are disproportionately affected by environmental problems. In many areas of the world, women are responsible for gathering water and fuel as well as being vulnerable to impacts of climate change. By recognizing these issues and their relational effect, feminists respond to the consequent environmental policies and practices. In advocating for ecosystem protection and providing refuge for those affected by environmental challenges they confirm the

interconnections between gender, social justice, and the environment. Jo's mother's escape from the city to the island is an example of the intersectionality of feminist issues in relation to nature. Due to an anticipated persecution, she was forced to secretly move from the urban world and seek refuge in the natural one, an all women utopian 'magical island'.

In fact, Jo's mother left the patriarchal world to seek refuge and protection in the island where she could express herself freely, exploit her full potential without being punished, and, most importantly, discover her magical powers. The narrator informs us that she was not fully welcomed by the birds and the spirits of the island due to her selfish attitude explained through her search for a treasure when she first set foot on the island. The mother's selfishness is also depicted through the act of abandoning her daughter who suffered enormously from the separation. As narrated in the novel, Tiana was hit by a bird spirit from the island because of her greed: "Three days later, the witch returned. Her pack a little fuller than before. She didn't speak. Maybe she couldn't. Across most of her face was a large handprint. Sunburn red with a bright white border. It looked as if the hand had been traced and pressed onto her skin" (Giddings, 2022, p. 147). As Tiana was looking for gold, diamonds, necklaces, and valuable rings only, the spirits left her a slap mark on her front head. However, her primary materialist quest transformed later to a natural one connecting her to the island.

Tiana's escapism is characterized by several features related to her spiritual feminist beliefs such as when she was strongly connected with nature as shown by her interest in plants, vegetables, and fruits. She embraced an ecological knowledge and kept developing it for informative acquisition. The island to where she escaped is associated with the mystical natural world that became a space and place of escapism to women whose

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powers are restricted, and rights oppressed. The mother embraces the power and beauty of the natural world finding deep connection with the spiritual world. The island represents the retreat from the urban and patriarchal society allowing her to reconnect with her resemblances and spiritual powers. Her escape was an expression of her feminist thoughts and beliefs driving her away from the corruptive nature society had made of her. The mother is strongly committed to feminist ideals and seeks to challenge the patriarchal system and structure that dominated her native country and nearly got hold of her own nature. She sought to actively participate and be an active member of the island to influence the life of her daughter politically, spiritually, and religiously.

Faith is based on the conviction or confidence in the truth, reliability and existence of someone or something that has an overall dominant spiritual power, a religious doctrine, a spiritual path, an ideology, or even in other people. It provides individuals with a sense of existence, a sense of purpose, and hope guiding their moral and ethical decision-making as well as providing solace and comfort in time of uncertainty. Magic, on the other hand, is a term that refers to a range of practices, beliefs, and phenomena that involve the manipulation of natural and spiritual forces to achieve an outcome. It is associated with mystical and supernatural powers and is present in different cultures and societies (Lévi, 1922).

Faith and magic are two distinct concepts that have both been explored in different cultures and societies throughout history. While faith and magic can have overlapping elements, they are distinct in their approaches and beliefs. Faith relies on truth, surrender, and acceptance of divine will and providence, whereas magic deals with the manipulation of supernatural forces. Faith emphasizes on obedience to religious doctrines and moral principles, while magic is seen as more individualistic or self-focused. These concepts reflect humanity's ongoing quest to

interact with the mysteries of the universe, and they provide different aspects of understanding and cooperation in order for humans to seek meaning and connection (James, 1988).

In *The Women Could Fly*, the protagonist evolves in a dystopian world. It is characterized by extreme unfairness and male dominance in which her experiences in relation to her faith play a significant role on how she confronts the death trial and all the physical and mental torture she was put under. Jo's faith provides a reliable strength and understanding to challenge the patriarchy she was enduring. In the novel, the focus on religion was barely mentioned. However, faith was there all along the way, specifically within Jo who, by and through it, had gained strength on her own interpretations. Her faith acts as a source of resistance against patriarchy. It gives her a sense of identity and allows her to preserve and protect her inner child and her individuality in a society that worked so hard to erase it. She finds comfort in faithful magical stories that her mother used to narrate to her that she kept using them throughout her adolescence and adulthood.

Jo finds strength in her own thoughts and memories allowing to mentally free herself from everyday pressure. These moments of reflection and imagination offer her a form of escape from the oppressive reality. When Jo arrives at the island and applies the fruit as a cream on her body, she explores her supernatural power, flying. She was strengthened by her faith to keep developing her abilities and being in touch with the magical birds representing the spirits of the island. When she came back to her society, she faced torture but faith and memories of magic explorations which kept her strong throughout the whole nightmare. These moments of reflection allowed her to sustain a sense of belonging, so she clung to her memories, emotions, and

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desires while resisting the attempts to dehumanize and control her.

5. Conclusion

Black women's oppression throughout history had taken many forms resulting in a resistance to challenge oppression and patriarchy. The inequality between genders persists till nowadays. Thus, fiction continues to discuss such pressing issues and to shed light on solutions. This paper discussed how Megan Giddings's novel *The Women Could Fly* depicted black women's attempt to obtain their rights and freedom through a faithful fight against patriarchy in a dystopian setting. By integrating insights from Marxist feminism, particularly Michele Barrett's analysis of the relationship between women's oppression and class exploitation, the research underscored the importance of recognizing the unique experiences of gender-based oppression and the necessity of feminist resistance in pursuit of social justice. Ultimately, the study contributed to a deeper understanding of how literature can serve as a platform for challenging dominant narratives and envisioning alternative realities that empower marginalized voices.

Within the alternative world depicted in this narrative, women embark on a journey of reconciliation, liberating themselves from the restraints of societal gender-based resentment. Jo's decision to extend forgiveness to both her father and the oppressive system exemplifies the internal struggle many women face between seeking revenge and embracing forgiveness. In a realm guided by principles of fairness and imbued with spiritual and faith-based guidance, women emerge as resilient challengers of patriarchal norms, carving out spaces for their empowerment. This underscores the resilience and resourcefulness of black women, who, despite encountering challenging obstacles, manage to carve out pathways toward peace and freedom within patriarchy.

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