

# The Collapse of Social Order in the South: Patriarchy and Female Subordination in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

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## ABSTRACT

*Patriarchy is a social organisation in which the father or the eldest male has absolute authority over the family members—women as well as children—and oftentimes, the clan. Marked by male supremacy, patriarchy as an institution of male-rule, and as a society dominated by men, depends heavily on female subordination. The antebellum American South was a typically patriarchal society where women were often subjected to cruel impositions, restricting their freedom of thought and choices to act. In the novel Absalom, Absalom! Faulkner examines how the patriarchal social order in the South, where women were usually treated as a nonentity and so much power was vested in men, collapsed as a result of the Civil War and Confederate defeat.*

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Patriarchy is a social organisation in which the father or the eldest male wields absolute authority over the family and oftentimes, the clan. In a patriarchal family, the father is the head of the family while women and children are dependent on him. After the father, the powers as well as the inheritance automatically descend to the male heirs. According to Uthara Soman, "Patriarchy denotes a social structure where the actions and ideas of men are dominant over those of women" (253).

Marked by male supremacy, patriarchy as an institution of male-rule, and as a society dominated by men, depends heavily on female subordination. Therefore, systematic and institutionalised gender oppression is constantly practised to ensure the perpetuation of undisputed monopoly of power in the society. The inherent natural differences between men and women has been used for long as a pretext to justify the prevalence of patriarchy in the society. Explaining the traditionalist view on patriarchy, Gerda Lerner says, "Traditionalists, whether working within a religious or a 'scientific' framework, have regarded women's subordination as universal, God-given, or natural, hence immutable. Thus, it need not be questioned. What has survived, survived because it was best; it follows that it should stay that way" (16).

Apparently, a male-centred social system that is identified and controlled by males would consider masculinity and masculine traits as superior to femininity and feminine traits, respectively. As a result, such a system would negatively influence societal attitude towards women—treating women as second-class citizens of the world, or worse, as something required only to fulfil men's needs. Two vicious notions, therefore stem from the patriarchal ideology. One is of male domination and the other is of female inferiority and hence subordination.

Unfortunately, the practice of patriarchy had never been restricted to any one community, society, or nation. In Joan Acker's words, "Patriarchy, in radical feminist versions, was seen as a universal, trans-historical and trans-cultural phenomenon; women were everywhere oppressed by men in more or less the same ways" (235).

Before the American Civil War (1861–1877), the Old South too was a patriarchal society right out of the Middle Ages. Not only the South "Throughout colonial America, patriarchy was the foundation for social, political, economic, familial, and religious developments" (Friend 28). However, women especially of the American South, even during the 19th century and until much later, were subjected to cruel or unjust impositions restricting their role, freedom of thought and choices to act within the male-dominated culture. As compared to the women of the North, the elite women of the South had a very insignificant identity and passive existence. This unimportant but well-defined elite-Southern-women-identity was tailored for them by the patriarchal society, which in turn, became integral to southern patriarchy and tradition.

However, the sectional tension and events surrounding the Civil War and Reconstruction began to pose formidable threat to patriarchy in the Old South and the general way of life of elite white southerners. As a result, the delicate web of gender, race, and class relations gradually tattered and the Old South started to disintegrate. With the end of slavery, the slaveholding fathers lost their power base too, which further invalidated their rule diminishing their role within the family and society.

William Faulkner strives to give meaning and value to this aspect of southern history in his works by delving into its chaos and irony. Faulkner's novels lucidly demonstrate his ethical obligation to examine the shattered South of his heritage, and in the process, to disentangle fact from fiction in order to bring clarity to the mayhem of his southern contemporary world.

As Quentin in *Absalom, Absalom!* attempts to understand the South of 1909 by constructing the story of Thomas Sutpen and by exploring the latter's legacy; similarly, Faulkner too investigates the plantation culture and traditions of the slave-owning Old South in his works, and explores white society's fruitless attempt to sustain its distinctive social institution by waging war (Osborne 1). However, since as a result of the Civil War and Confederate defeat, the Southern

white men had broken their pact as patriarchs to protect white women, the defeat had a far-reaching and lasting impact on the psyche of the South, its way-of-life, and its social order.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner depicts the discord between the values of the aristocratic Old South and the New South through Thomas Sutpen's values. As masculinity in the Old South centred on mastery, "Family and the household were the crucibles in which mastery was forged. Manhood therefore required an independent household and landownership, a submissive wife and children, and ideally slaves" (Friend ix). Throughout the novel, Sutpen too strives to assert his manhood and establish his position in the postbellum South by obtaining all the assets that a Southern gentleman of the Old South ought to possess: "I had a design. To accomplish it I should require money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family—incidentally of course, a wife" (Faulkner 212). Along with riches and property, Sutpen's design for his dynasty includes a central component—a virginal, fertile and, ideally, respectable wife of entirely white ancestry who will bear equally white male heirs to continue the Sutpen dynasty. Sutpen's commitment to his design remains absolute and unchangeable, and he drags along with him all weak and defenseless individuals—women, wives, children, and slaves. Sutpen "makes clear that standards of aristocratic breeding and female subordination work to guarantee a clear line of patrilineal descent in a society founded on racial distinction" (Hite 65).

In his attempt to maintain his patriarchal and aristocratic values, Sutpen succeeds in acquiring a respectable wife, a male heir and a hundred square miles of land, but his "design" unfortunately, collapses because of the flawed central principles on which it was based. Sutpen believes that by merely acquiring 'men (and women) and material' he can make his design a success and therefore, he reduces the human component of his 'design' to a mechanical system in which all human interactions have to be a set of predetermined operations. He fails to understand that at the heart of human existence lies the attachment to human relations (Easterbrook 69). By rejecting and pushing away his children, Sutpen ruins his own family that played such a vital role in his 'design.'

In Sutpen's scheme of things, there is no prospect for a healthy father-son relationship between him and his sons. While Sutpen's legitimate son Henry has to bear his tyranny since childhood, the other son Charles Bon has to spend his life trying to gain recognition from Sutpen. Bon says, "I shall penetrate by something of will and intensity and dreadful need, and strip that alien leavening from it and look not on my brother's face whom I did not know I possessed and hence never missed, but my father's. . ." (Faulkner 254). Both the sons—Henry and Bon, therefore, become the victim of patriarch Sutpen's twisted sense of family.

As Sutpen is inclined to exercise arbitrary and overbearing control over others, he exercises this control not just over his children but over women as well. He treats women as commodity and denies them any right to think or act on their own, thereby causing even more harm to his 'design' to thrive in the New South. Faulkner, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, criticizes this very societal construction by showing through Sutpen's

character how men use women as objects and value them only for bearing heirs, discarding them afterwards when they become barren like Ellen Coldfield or are no longer useful for physical pleasures. Exploring further the theme of commodification of woman in the patriarchal Old South, Faulkner grants two wives to patriarch Sutpen—Eulalia Bon and Ellen Coldfield—each of whom are consumed by him for either bearing heirs or just sexual gratification. He uses both the women for his own selfish goals yet remains true to none of them. Besides, there is Rosa Coldfield as well who also feels betrayed at the hands of Sutpen.

Notably, "The last half of *Absalom, Absalom!* is dominated by male voices. These voices encode the sexual politics of patriarchy by silencing women as speaking subjects within its narrative of mastery. These male voices seize the narrative, and they speak with authority" (Gwin 165), thereby silencing the voice of Rosa Coldfield.

The white-male-driven Southern society imposed several restrictions on women. As the men held a superior, independent and dominant positions, the women were expected to be powerless, meek, and dependent opposites. In the pre-Civil War era, the southern patriarchy was constructed to give the white men absolute power and autonomy; the privileged white women, on the other hand, accepted subordination and dependence. However, the most crucial element of this patriarchal agreement was her guarantee of protection and security for herself and her children. Therefore, in the pre-war plantation culture, powerful and wealthy men protected white women from the outside world. Accordingly, women of the elite class identified themselves in terms of men—men were strong, and women were weak; men made decisions, and women obeyed; men set the rules, and women followed them. Elite white women understood that the privilege of security and a sheltered life was the upshot of their subordination to their men and so they kept on maintaining the status quo.

Under their men's shelter, women ran the domestic affairs of house and children, while men managed the broader world of business and politics. The women had only two aims in life—to get married and give birth to male heirs to perpetuate their husband's dynasty. Therefore, most women really aspired to marry at the right age and to be able to bear a male child. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Ellen Coldfield—a woman from a respectable family—too, feels that her sole purpose, as a woman, is fulfilled as she marries Thomas Sutpen and bears him a male heir. Being a married woman having a son, Ellen feels satisfied and considers herself as being one with her own class of women, unlike her spinster sister Rosa Coldfield, who leads a tough and dull life.

Incidentally, the southern white aristocratic society deemed women, irrespective of whether they were single or married, as both the real and mythical crest of pristine womanhood on earth, because a southern woman was thought to symbolise Christian virtues such as chastity, righteousness, and self-sacrifice, together with comeliness and sophistication in the southern culture. Thus, in her protected existence, the southern white woman formed an inherent part of the patriarchal dream of the American South.

It is ironic that, being complicit in their subordination, the elite white women were both beneficiaries as well as victims of the patriarchal social order. On the one hand, they helped create the image of a happy and prosperous plantation, while on the other, there was a pervasive sense of discontent among all women—wives and daughters who were not more than slaves to the patriarchs. While these women could distinguish between the decorous, prudent men on whom they depended for shelter and security and the amoral men who had sexual relations with the black slave women; as genteel, dainty ladies, these women would rather overlook their men's behaviour. The women understood that rules in the elite class were unbending, and that it was their responsibility to uphold those rules amidst the sexual double standards, irrespective of the harm they cause to them and their families.

However, the protected life of the elite white women was mercilessly torn apart when the Civil War began and their men left home to fight. The delicate unskilled women were suddenly pushed into the role of the caretaker of their men's estate. They had to simultaneously, manage the plantation and the slaves; provide for their family; and learn doing actual domestic chores like cooking and farming that had earlier been the purview of slaves. Instead of men, they had to now rely on themselves for their and their family's protection and security. The Civil War, thus, not only led to the disappearance of old social order but also unleashed utter chaos upon the Southern society.

It may be pointed out here that no matter how well these women had handled the worldly affairs in the absence of their men, they were, from the inside, keen to give up their newly acquired duties and go back to their domestic roles as soon as possible because, being ill-equipped for the challenges, they were already exhausted from all the hardships that they had been facing. This is the reason why, when Thomas Sutpen comes back home after the Civil War, Judith immediately hands over the plough to her father and resumes her household chores (Osborne 31). Like Judith, many other white women were also willing to go back to their conventional domestic duties so that men could work and provide for them as they had always done.

Another aspect of southern patriarchy that Faulkner explores in *Absalom, Absalom!* is that of miscegenation. The elite white men often had sexual alliances with black slave women that resulted in mulatto or mixed-race children. After the war, when the white South again tried to establish racial superiority, the lack of required racial purity posed a big challenge to those attempts. Miscegenation also questioned the basic meaning of family and kinship because the white masters often denied paternity and rightful place to their interracial

offspring. As a result, such children as well as the South had to bear the agonizing burden of miscegenation for generations. Faulkner clearly depicts the position of mixed-raced children in this novel. Charles Bon, the sophisticated part-black son of Thomas Sutpen and Eulalia, his first wife in Haiti, is castoff by Sutpen and is eventually killed by his brother Henry—Sutpen's legitimate white son. Sutpen needs pure white sons for realizing his 'design' and to perpetuate his dynasty, yet he bears some mixed-race children including the son, Charles Bon. As Thomas Sutpen has a strict racial code just like the South he lives in, he does not ever allow the "impure" son Charles Bon a rightful place in his dynasty. Similarly, Clytemnestra Sutpen or Clytie, Sutpen's daughter with a black slave woman is also denied a proper place in the Sutpen family, though she still teams up with her white sister Judith to save Sutpen's plantation. In this way, *Absalom, Absalom!* reveals how miscegenation not only adversely affected family dynamics but also complicated racial identification and interracial relationship in a culture so obsessed with purity.

Faulkner's portrayal of female characters further shows that the identity of women in the Old South was intricately tied to male patriarchs. Despite that the women in the novel are invested with various strengths, they are neither individually nor collectively powerful enough to prevent the breakdown of the very patriarchal power by which they are defined. For instance, Judith who grows up as a genteel and protected daughter on his father's plantation and seems weak and pliant at first, develops an iron will in due course as she survives the Civil war with Clytie, yet she fails to save her father, Sutpen, from his doom.

Faulkner examines in *Absalom, Absalom!* the enduring aftermaths of the white patriarchy that dominated the antebellum and postbellum South. He demonstrates the chaotic state of gender relations in the American South of that period caused due to the destabilization of a traditionally patriarchal society by the Civil War and increasing industrialisation.

The novel is a scathing remark on gender bias, racial injustice, and sexist mentality. Faulkner uses Sutpen's character and his failed 'design' to represent, respectively, the patriarchal Old South and the collapse of the social order in which so much power was vested exclusively in men. Faulkner vehemently disapproves of the system that denies women the power to control their own lives. At the same time, he also holds the women, who are accomplice in their own subordination, equally responsible for their failure to develop and sustain an identity separate from patriarchal determinism.

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