

Feminist Perspective: Women's Treatment and Role in Blindly Followed Tradition in Jackson's *The Lottery*

Rizwan Ahmad¹

Abstract

Submitted: 21-08-24

Accepted: 10-09-24

Reviewed: 25-10-24

Published: 26-12-24

Blindly following traditions in a male-dominated society has unwanted consequences, especially, for women. A significant number of studies can be found regarding the subjugation and marginalization of women but very little focus has been given to the blindly followed traditions set by men in a male-dominated society. Hence this research tends to explore the role of women in a deeply traditional and custom rooted society, and women's treatment as "Other beings" regarding the feminist perspective and the concept given in "*The Second Sex*" (De Beauvoir, 2016), Simone de Beauvoir particularly discusses women's roles in traditional societies and their link to male authority. Furthermore, this research is qualitative in nature and textual analysis has been employed (McKee, 2001). However, the data have been collected from the short story *The Lottery* by Jackson. The findings suggest that women are treated as "Other beings" and their role is subdued in the blindly followed traditions of patriarchal society.

Keywords: The Second Sex, The Lottery, Other Beings, Simon De Beauvoir, Feminism



This is an open access article distributed under the terms of [CC-BY-4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, reproduction and adaptation in any medium and for any purpose with proper attribution to the original author(s), title, journal, and URL.

¹ MPhil Scholar, COMSAT Islamabad.

INTRODUCTION

Jackson's *The Lottery* depiction of women has left a lasting impression on literature and feminist thought. How women are portrayed in the story as being oppressed has spurred discussions on gender inequity and the need for social reform. *The Lottery* is a cautionary story that challenges the existing quo and invites readers to think critically. Jackson's writings continue to spur conversations on women's rights and empowerment by bringing attention to the difficulties experienced by women. According to Beauvoir, men now play the role of the transcendent subject, while women are degraded to the status of the immanent "Other being." "She is defined and differentiated concerning man and not he concerning her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential," she says in a well-known statement from the Introduction to *The Second Sex*. She is the Other; he is the Subject and the Absolute (Allen, 2005). The differentiation between man as the Subject and women as the "Other being" is crucial in Beauvoir's comprehension of domination or oppression.

Jackson's *The Lottery* describes the occurrence in an unnamed village where villagers stone to death the lottery winner annually. From a feminist perspective, the story may be interpreted as an accusation against patriarchal society and its constrictive traditions. In Jackson's story, women seem to be marginalized and powerless while the men in the community occupy places of power. The lottery itself could be interpreted as a representation of the sacrifices and subordinations which women face in a culture where tradition and conformity are valued over individual liberties and rights. The story may be interpreted as a struggle against the degrading effects of gender stereotypes and a call for the emancipation of women from the chains of oppressive social setups.

The life of its members is usually molded by the deep-rooted conventions, rituals, and beliefs that define traditional and cultural societies. Normally, the gender norms in these civilizations were stiff, and hierarchies usually placed women in lower roles. Men are mostly given the roles of leaders and decision-makers, while women's lives are often centered on household chores. Tradition and conformity are prioritized within these societies over the rights and empowerment of the individual. However, it is important to understand that not all traditional and cultural communities are the same and that women can be treated differently and given different duties.

Women are given specific tasks that are focused on their reproductive and caring capacities within traditional and cultural communities. They are supposed to take care of the home, nurture the children, and help their husbands. Communities usually undervalue and undercut women's work and contribution because they view their jobs as an extension and a 'feminine' one. Moreover, they usually only fulfill a private role and have little to no say in the political or public spheres. In these civilizations, gender inequality is upheld, and the potential of women is bounded by lack of agency and freedom.

Women have a special role in Jackson's *The Lottery*. According to the tale, women are mostly in charge of taking care of the home and their lives are centered around domesticity. Women appear docile and acquiescent to the society ruled by men, which underlines how oppressive the cultural and traditional standards are. It has to be recalled at all times, however, that not all females in *The Lottery* are helpless victims. Certain characters, such as Tessie Hutchinson, dispute the lottery ritual's impartiality and pose challenges to the current quo. This intricacy highlights the value of empowerment and resistance while giving the story more depth.

Problem Statement

In a deeply traditional and custom-rooted society where individuals strictly adhere to traditions and cultural values questions about the treatment and role of women in the society. In Jackson's short story *The Lottery*, women's roles and their treatment are subjugated to the blindly followed tradition. Moreover,

culture and tradition are used to oppress and disregard women. Through a feminist lens, this research intends to examine the treatment and role of women as other in the traditional and culturally strict society portrayed by Jackson in her short story *The Lottery*.

Research Questions

The following are the main research questions of this research;

- How the role of women is portrayed in the blindly traditional society where traditions are prioritized?
- How does Jackson use the concept of tradition in *The Lottery* to comment on the treatment of women as “Other” in a deeply traditional rooted society?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery" has been a topic of vast critical analysis on themes such as social and political protest, evil of humanity, paganism, conformism, tradition, and its relation to Holocaust literature. A study made by the year 2018, analyzes the sharp social and political denouncement that Jackson develops in the story of *The Lottery*, where she strongly criticizes the injustice and dehumanization of people. The author states that Jackson, through this story, protests against the violations of human rights, especially after the Second World War, emphasizing the victimization of the silenced woman who was obliged to carry out a deadly tradition (Ismael & Ali, 2018).

Another study shows how the element of paganism in *The Lottery* reflects mystical and superstitious beliefs through the villagers' adherence to the sacrificial ritual. Despite the fact that the characters exist in a modern society, their actions were dictated by old pagan traditions, showing just how irrational beliefs persist (Syam & Syamsidar, 2018).

Also, in another study, the critique of Jackson against conformism and tradition is analyzed, explaining how the story portrays a blind and somehow violently conforming society to a tradition. The analysis delves into the conflict of conformism versus marginal thinking with the view of characters, setting, and plot structure in an attempt to bring to light the consequence of blind following traditions (Turkie, n.d.).

One essay places *The Lottery* in the context of Holocaust literature, which argues that Jackson's story invokes a number of scapegoat and death selection themes reminiscent of the Holocaust narrative. By exploring contemporary literature and discourse on the Holocaust, the essay suggests that Jackson's story contributes to a broader discourse on these themes (Robinson, 2019).

Another analysis draws on William Empson's concept of ambiguity to read *The Lottery* in five opposing ways; the critique is toward capitalist, communist, and religious traditions. The study suggests that Jackson created the ambiguities in her story to provoke the readers into reflection over societal norms and traditions (Hakaraia, 2019).

Through the lens of Emile Durkheim's sociological theories, another interpretation views the protagonist's death in *The Lottery* as a form of altruistic suicide, in which the integration of the individual within society and the social bonds that have an impact on actions are highlighted (Anoosheh & Oroskhan, 2018).

One of the studies on 2019 illustrates how perlocutionary acts in *The Lottery* refashioned society through horror culture. This study, therefore, seeks to discuss in detail the horror elements depicted within *The Lottery* through the action of the characters (Sari & Tur, 2019).

The above literature demonstrates the depth and complexity of Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery*, revealing its multifaceted themes and its ability to provoke critical thought on various aspects of society and human nature. This study aims to uncover the role of women and treatment in a culturally blended society where

traditions are blindly followed. Through the feminist perspective, it analyses the story to unveil how women are being treated and subjugated in the face of cultural norms and tradition in the society of Jackson's *The Lottery*.

METHODOLOGY

The undertaken research is qualitative in nature and has been carried out using a feminist perspective. Textual analysis by Alan McKee (2001) has been done in the light of a feminist view of Simone de Beauvoir (De Beauvoir, 2016). Using textual analysis, as McKee claims that when we perform textual analysis on a text to make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text (McKee, 2001). As for finding the answers to this research questions, some of the lines have been taken from *The Lottery* for analysis and tried to make the meaning from it. Moreover, feminist literary theory (De Beauvoir, 2016) serves as the foundation for the data analysis, which sheds light on issues of women's role, gender, power, and tradition. Additionally, the investigation looks at how these components represent wider views towards women in society.

Theoretical Framework

In a deeply cultural rooted, traditional and male-dominated society women are being subjugated and women can be seen as marginalized, overpowered and treated as other beings. The same can be observed in *The Lottery*. This research study employs feminist perspective to analyze the portrayal of women in a blindly traditional society as depicted in Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery*. It explores how traditional norms and values influence women's roles and treatment, using Simone de Beauvoir's concept of *The Second Sex* to examine women's marginalization and objectification (De Beauvoir, 2016). Moreover, in her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir particularly discusses women's roles in traditional societies and their link to male authority. In her seminal work on feminist theory, Beauvoir explores how women have historically been marginalised and disadvantaged regarding males. She contends that women's subjugation and marginalisation in society are the result of their definition of "other" regarding males (Bergoffen & Burke, 2004). This research also considers how Jackson uses tradition in the story to comment on the treatment of women as others. Through this analysis, the study aims to illuminate the impact of blindly traditional society on women's role and treatment in a male-dominated and less women-empowered society.

Data Analysis

Shirley Jackson's work presents an unnamed village which is deeply cultural and traditional. It is male-dominated where all the power is held by the men. She has given a clear message to the readers that blindly following a tradition can be harmful with unwanted consequences. The village that she has created in her work is inhabited by a few thousand people. Where there is a tradition of an annual lottery event. People of the village take part in it as it has been a traditional event which has been passed to them through their ancestors. However, the lottery has lost its true essence but since it is traditional, therefore, the villages take part in it. As the text shows about the old tradition of the lottery; ***"The original paraphernalia for the lottery had been lost long ago, and the black box now resting on the stool had been put into use even before Old Man Warner, the oldest man in town, was born"***(p. 1). It indicates the "black box" as a representation of custom and the repressive structure of patriarchal culture. The loss of the lottery's accoutrements raises the possibility that the tradition's original intent has been forgotten. The fact that the custom is being followed despite this loss suggests that people follow rituals mindlessly and don't consider their meaning.

The oldest man in the community, Old Man Warner, is mentioned, highlighting the tradition's longevity and the elder generation's approval of it—who are frequently thought of as preserving traditional values. This

might be interpreted as a critique of how gender roles and expectations are reinforced by patriarchal customs and conventions that are passed down through the generations.

Mr. Summers is the one in charge of the event of the lottery. He plays an authoritative role in the story as well. He suggests at the beginning of the story that the box has become old and needs to be replaced. ***“Mr Summers spoke frequently to the villagers about making a new box, but no one liked to upset even as much tradition as was represented by the black box.” (pg. 1).***

The villagers are against Mr. Summers's proposal to introduce a new box because they are unwilling to disrupt the long-standing tradition, which is represented by the black box. On the contrary, they desire transformation and advancement. This resistance to change is indicative of a larger issue of resistance to questioning conventional gender roles and power structures. It implies that upholding the status quo, even if it means sustaining oppressive regimes, is frequently preferred in a patriarchal society. Furthermore, the notion that no one enjoys breaking tradition suggests that there is social pressure to fit in and follow accepted standards, even when they are harmful. Women are especially susceptible to this pressure as they risk rejection or hostility if they question patriarchal norms and expectations.

Moreover, another reason for not replacing the box was because it was made of pieces of the old box by the first people who settled down in the village who then established the tradition of the lottery. The following instance, ***“There was a story that the present box had been made with some pieces of the box that had preceded it, the one that had been constructed when the first people settled down to make a village here.” (pg. 1),*** shows the notion that the box is constructed from its history suggests that the past moulds and affects the present and that escaping these historical effects is challenging. As a representation of tradition, the box shows how deeply ingrained traditional ideas are in society and how hard it may be to overcome.

Although, some villages have given up this tradition as it has lost its true essence as Mrs. Adams mentions, "some places have already quit lotteries", but in response, the old man Warner responds to them as fools, ***“Nothing but trouble in that, Old Man Warner said stoutly.” “Pack of young fools” (pg. 4).*** Furthermore, this conversation emphasises how resistant older generations are to change in patriarchal society since they are frequently more ingrained in customs and ideas. Mrs. Adams's observation of certain locations giving up lotteries points to a shift away from damaging customs and towards development. But Old Man Warner's reply amounts to a resolute defence of custom and denigration of those who advocate for change as "young fools." This exchange might be interpreted as a representation of the age gap that frequently surfaces in conversations concerning women's rights and gender equality. Older generations may be less receptive to change since they were raised in patriarchal environments and have profited from them. They may see attempts to challenge tradition as silly or even dangerous. It's possible to perceive Warner's rejection of individuals who disagree with the lottery as an example of gatekeeping, a tactic used by the powerful to silence critics and preserve their control. In a patriarchal society, people who question the current quo are frequently silenced or marginalised. This is a tendency that is reflected throughout.

In the story, men can be seen as the heads and they are taking the leading roles. Women can't participate in the lottery. It is only the men who can take part in the lottery as head of the house. Moreover, through men's decisions, the future is decided especially for women. Mr. Summers, particularly, can be seen as the one who has the power and he makes all the arrangements for the lottery's event. However, no woman has given the right to be part of it, from the initiation to the conclusion of the event only men can be seen dealing the event. It can be seen in the following line; ***“The night before the lottery, Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves made up the slips of paper and put them in the box, and it was then taken to the safe of Mr. Summers' coal company and locked up until Mr. Summers was ready to take it to the square next morning” (pg. 2).*** Primarily, it indicates the fact that men, Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves, are in charge of the lottery and organise it illustrates the power dynamics in which men hold positions of authority and make decisions that have an impact on the community as a whole. This is consistent with larger social systems in which men have traditionally occupied influential and powerful roles. Furthermore, the container containing the pieces

of paper was stored in the secure vault of Mr. Summers' coal company, symbolizing the merging of paternalistic control and financial influence. The box is locked up at a location connected to Mr. Summers' firm, indicating that financial interests are strongly linked to the upholding of customs, even when they are detrimental. Lastly, the secrecy surrounding the preparation of the lottery slips, with Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves being the only ones involved, no woman can be seen as part of it, highlights a lack of transparency and accountability in decision-making processes. This can be interpreted as a critique of how patriarchal societies often operate, with power consolidated among a select few who are not held accountable to the wider community. Moreover, the women are treated as other beings in the story and they haven't been given their true role.

Later, on it is then this paper that decides the fate of Mrs. Bill Hutchinson, ***"Bill Hutchinson went over to his wife and forced the slip of paper out of her hand. It had a black spot on it, the black spot Mr. Summers had made the night before with the heavy pencil in the coal company office."***(pg. 4). Her fate to be stoned was decided by Mr. Summers in the closed door of his coal company office. She was then stoned to death by the villagers without having a second thought. It also shows the savage human nature who blindly follows traditions that are of no value and essence. She resisted but her voice was suppressed by killing her as she went against the pointless tradition of the lottery.

Women being treated as others are not allowed to be representatives of their families. In one instance, a woman asked to be the representative of her family as there was no adult man to participate in the lottery event. It can be seen in the following lines; ***"Me, I guess," a woman said, and Mr. Summers turned to look at her. "Wife draws for her husband," Mr. Summers said. "Don't you have a grown boy to do it for you, Janey?" "Horace's not but sixteen yet," Mrs. Dunbar said regretfully. "Guess I gotta fill in for the old man this year."***(pg. 3). As it has been traditionally set that women cannot do such jobs. The statement said by Mr. Summers, suggests that a male family member should be responsible for carrying out duties that are considered challenging or unpleasant, hence perpetuating conventional gender norms. Moreover, she is considered less responsible as compared to a man and thus replaced by a sixteen-year-old boy. Mrs. Dunbar's response, *"Horace's not but sixteen yet,"* suggests that age and gender are factors in determining who is expected to perform certain tasks. It is the rules set by society. Despite her reluctance, Mrs. Dunbar feels obligated to fill in for her husband because her son is not considered old enough to take on this responsibility, highlighting the limitations imposed by gender norms.

The statement, ***"Daughters draw with their husbands' families, Tessie," Mr. Summers said gently. "You know that as well as anyone else."*** Shows that women are powerless in the male-dominated society which is crafted by Jackson. As stated by Simone, women are considered as "other beings" and hence they are marginalized and objectified in the patriarchal society. The above statement makes it clear to everyone that certain traditional rules are set in the village and no one can violate the rules. It is the traditional role of the village which has given men the high position and they are in power to decide the fate of the women in the society. Furthermore, those who rebel against such pointless traditions and rules ultimately have to face the consequences as in the case of Tessie Hutchinson, who raised her voice against the tyranny and tradition of the village her voice was suppressed by killing her. ***"She held her hands out desperately as the villagers moved in on her." "It isn't fair,"*** she said. Eventually a stone hit her head. Old Man Warner said, ***"Come on, come on, everyone."*** (pg. 7). It shows how she was treated in the middle of the town by the town's people and she was completely desperate seeking for help but no one was there. Even her own family couldn't stand by her side and let her alone. She was consistently saying; ***"It isn't fair, it isn't right," Mrs. Hutchinson screamed, and then they were upon her."*** (pg. 7). Despite, the fact that the lottery has lost its true essence the villagers have been following the tradition that each year takes one's life. Being a woman Tessie Hutchinson was treated as other and she was subjected to ill-treatment. A piece of paper which was made by Mr Summers took her life which clearly shows the role of a woman as other and objectified treatment in a male-dominated society. In such a society, women are confined to house chores. They are deprived of their equal right and hence their voices are suppressed by oppressing and marginalizing them.

CONCLUSION

The Lottery by Jackson is a critical depiction of a village which is deeply cultural and traditional. The inhabitants are the blind followers of a pointless tradition of lottery which has currently lost its true essence. Through *The Lottery*, Shirley portrays how blindly following the tradition of a male-dominated society subjugates women and they are objectified and treated as inhuman. As Simone stated women are mainly considered as others in a male-dominated society where all the power and high positions are seated by men. It can be seen throughout the story where men are presented as heads of the families are they are only permitted to participate in the lottery that eventually decides the fate of a woman in the story.

References

- Allen, A. (2005). *Feminist Perspectives on Power*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/ENTRIES/feminist-power/#PoweDomi>
- Anoosheh, S. M., & Oroskhan, M. H. (2018). Examining Durkheim's Model of Suicide on Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery". *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences*, 31.
- Bergoffen, D., & Burke, M. (2004). *Simone de Beauvoir*. <https://seop.illc.uva.nl/entries/beauvoir/#SecoSexWomaOthe>
- De Beauvoir, S. (2016). The second sex. In *Social Theory Re-Wired* (pp. 367–377). Routledge.
- Hakaraia, T. (2019). Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery,' and William Empson's Seven Types of Ambiguity. *Humanities*, 8(3), 137.
- Ismael, Z. I., & Ali, S. A. K. (2018). Human Rights at Stake: Shirley Jackson's Social and Political Protest in "The Lottery". *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 7(6), 28–36.
- McKee, A. (2001). A beginner's guide to textual analysis. *Metro Magazine: Media & Education Magazine*, 127/128, 138–149.
- Robinson, M. (2019). Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" and Holocaust Literature. *Humanities*, 8(1), 35.
- Sari, F. A., & Tur, A. P. A. (2019). Reshaping the Society Face through The Culture of Horror Told in Shirley Jackson's The Lottery. *Notion: Journal of Linguistics, Literature, and Culture*, 1(1), 1–7.
- Syam, E., & Syamsidar, R. (2018). The Elements of Paganism as Reflected in Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery". *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science*, 175(1), 012086.
- Turkie, M. S. (n.d.). *Dystopian Society in Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery"*.