

## AN EXPLORATION OF KYA CLARK'S PATRIARCHAL CHALLENGES IN DELIA OWENS' *WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING* NOVEL

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### Abstrak

Studi ini mengeksplorasi tantangan patriarki yang dihadapi oleh Kya Clark sebagai tokoh utama dalam novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* karya Delia Owens. Dengan menggunakan feminism eksistensialis oleh Simone de Beauvoir, penelitian ini menyelidiki eksplorasi tantangan patriarki yang dihadapi Kya Clark dalam novel, serta memeriksa representasi peran gender dan penggambaran mendalam tentang individualitas wanita. Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji tantangan patriarki spesifik yang dihadapi oleh tokoh utama, kebutuhan perjuangannya untuk kemandirian dan otonomi, serta peran hubungannya dengan alam dalam membentuk perspektif feminism eksistensialisnya. Metode pembacaan dekat diterapkan, dengan fokus pada analisis teksual dari narasi novel dan tokoh utama. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa Kya Clark menghadapi tantangan patriarki seperti diskriminasi dan objektifikasi, yang berkontribusi pada perjalanan dan individualitasnya sebagai seorang wanita. Dengan menyoroti perjalanan Kya, studi ini menekankan kekuatan yang diperlukan untuk mengatasi kendala sosial dan mendukung kesetaraan gender serta penghormatan terhadap hak dan identitas wanita.

**Kata Kunci:** Patriarki, Feminisme, Feminisme Eksistensialis, *the Other*

### Abstract

This study explores the patriarchal challenges encountered by Kya Clark as the main character in *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens. Utilizing existentialist feminism by Simone de Beauvoir, the research delves into the exploration of Kya Clark's patriarchal challenges in the novel, examining the representation of gender roles and the impactful portrayal of women's individuality. The study aims to examine the specific patriarchal challenges faced by the main character, the necessity of her fight for independence and autonomy, and the role of her relationship with nature in shaping her existentialist feminism perspective. A close reading method approach is employed, focusing on the textual analysis of the novel's narrative and the main character. The findings suggest that Kya Clark's encounters patriarchal challenges such as discrimination and objectification, which contribute to her journey and individuality as a woman. By highlighting Kya's journey, this study underscores the strength required to overcome societal constraints and advocates for gender equality and respect for women's rights and identities.

**Keywords:** Patriarchal, Feminism, Existentialist Feminism, the Other

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In today's society, women continue to face various obstacles that have an influence on their existence and autonomy. Starting with gender discrimination, gender inequality, and female stereotypes. Women are often confronted with complicated social issues which affect their personal identities and opportunities. Despite improvements in gender equality, women continue to face societal issues such as a lack of representation in leadership roles. These behaviors frequently result in patriarchal views or rules and regulations, as well as social

expectations, which limit women's capacity to reach their full potential and autonomy.

Bhasin defines patriarchal or patriarchy as male authority and power dynamics in which men dominate women (Kamayan et al., 2022). Patriarchy is a concept that puts men in positions of authority and power, resulting in gender inequality. Patriarchy as a social system or structure in which men hold primary power as the central and almighty ruler, thus gender inequality that affect aspects of life are caused by patriarchal system (Alfian in Fadiyah, et al. 2023). In a patriarchal society, male dominance is often institutionalized and perpetuated through cultural norms, traditions, laws, and institutions,

while women and other marginalized groups may face discrimination, oppression, and limited access to resources and opportunities.

As time passes, the patriarchal system stereotypes gender roles, confirming the concept that men are better suited for positions of authority and taking decisions while women are assigned to underprivileged roles. Women have also always been represented as fragile, powerless, and unsuited for leadership roles (Fadiyah et al., 2023).

Patriarchal challenges refer to the various difficulties and obstacles that arise in living in a society dominated by patriarchal views. Patriarchal challenges can occur in various fields, including economic, social, political and personal, thus creating a system of widespread gender inequality. These challenges are interrelated and cumulative, creating a cycle of loss that is difficult to break.

Delia Owens' novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* offers a rich exploration of patriarchal challenges, set in the mid-20th century American South. The story centers on Kya Clark, a young woman who grows up isolated in the marsh of North Carolina. Abandoned by her family and by society, Kya's experiences reflect broader themes of gender inequality and societal expectations. She faces prejudice, isolation, and the struggle for independence in a patriarchal society that views her as an outcast. Through Kya's journey, Owens highlights the resilience and strength required to overcome the challenges posed by patriarchal norms.

This study aims to address different ways of observing a patriarchal in a literary work utilizes Existentialist Feminism by Simone de Beauvoir. Feminism is a movement of demanding full equality between women and men that cover aspects of life (Lexically, Moeliono et al. in Yusuf & Susilo, 2020) while Existentialist Feminism is about women being able to present themselves, embracing their actual selves without being constrained by society expectations or roles.

According to Lestari et al. (2022), Beauvoir's existentialist feminism appears based on the thought that woman has been viewed as men's opposite. It celebrates the idea that women, like all individuals, have the important right to define their existence, challenge oppressive structures, and live freely in accordance with their own essence and goals. Kamayan et al. (2022) asserts that existentialist feminism underscores the importance of women's ability to live fully and authentically, continuously exercising their liberty to carve out meaningful lives. This theoretical framework emphasizes the importance of personal freedom and the ability to make authentic choices in defining one's identity, advocating for

women to resist societal expectations in order to achieve true self-freedom.

It criticizes societal systems and norms that assign women to the role of "the other", denying them autonomy and independence. Existentialist feminism encourages women to challenges conventional gender roles and societal expectations, reclaim their autonomy to develop their own lives and identities.

Simone de Beauvoir outlines three primary forms of oppression that women face. The first is the main difference in roles between men and women. Beauvoir argues men regard women's behaviors as simply representations of their own anxieties, and those behaviors are only validated if they meet men's approval (Lestari et al., 2023). The second form of oppression is violence against women. Based on male perspectives, women are incomplete without men's presence, reducing them to become accessories meant to fulfill men desires (Lestari et al. 2023). Sexual harassment constitutes the third form of oppression. Beauvoir observes that women are often reduced to sexual objects, valued primarily for their ability to satisfy men sexual needs. Men, by labelling women as sexual beings deny them possibility of becoming absolute subjects in their own right (Beauvoir in Lestari et al. 2023).

This study explores the necessity for a main character to assert her independence and autonomy as a woman amidst these challenges. Additionally, the study analyzes the relationship between the character's connection with nature and her experiences with patriarchy, highlighting how this relationship shapes her existentialist feminism perspective. The unique connection between Kya Clark and the natural environment in the novel offers a specific perspective on overcoming patriarchal, emphasizing the interplay between her autonomy and natural world.

This study offers valuable insights into how a character in the novel experiences and develops her sense of self, according to analysis. This research is intended to result in a written thesis that will broaden knowledge and understanding in the field of existentialist feminism analysis, allowing for a more in-depth theoretical investigation of women's experiences within the patriarchal system.

## METHOD

This thesis involves a comprehensive textual analysis approach that provides an in-depth study of Delia Owen's novel *Where the Crawdads Sing*. The study focuses on Kya Clark's journey within a patriarchal society and the main character's relationship with nature within existentialist feminism perspective by Simone de Beauvoir.

This approach is intended to methodically investigate narrative components in the text from the novel. The primary data is gathered directly from the novel through thorough close reading, with a focus on sections relevant to the research aims. This approach involves recognizing key motifs, analyzing the main character, and interpreting symbolism and imagery.

The data analysis process begins with reading and annotating the novel, then categorizing text quotations based on subject relevance. The final procedure entails collecting and integrating examined data backed up by evidence from new and additional sources.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Patriarchal Challenges

Leaning on Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, Kya's life story becomes a moving exploration of women's struggle for identity and recognition in a world dominated by men. Kya's resistance against patriarchal challenges correlates with Beauvoir's theory, which stresses the individual's struggle with societal expectations. Kya's struggle draws attention as an issue to the patriarchal challenges that women like her confront.

*Sneaking out to her shack, running through the dark and tagging it, had become a regular tradition, an initiation for boys becoming men. What did that say about men? Some of them were already making bets about who would be the first to get her cherry. (p. 143)*

Sneaking onto someone's property without their consent is an invasion of privacy. The fact that this is considered a tradition that occurs in Kya shows the existence of disrespecting boundaries and shaping the perception of women as passive objects for men. Furthermore, the phrase "getting her cherry" expresses an inappropriate attitude toward Kya, a woman who is portrayed as an easy toy in the eyes of men, with no agency or demands of her own. The phrase also refers to sexual activity that is only perceived by men, with women viewed as passive objects to be used and discarded. Betting on who will be the first to engage in sexual activity with Kya reveals the limitations of respecting her autonomy and boundaries. This gives rise to the assumption that she is only used as a prize to be fought over and is intended for men who win the competition.

*"She came stumblin' out toward her boat, and well, she was partway undressed. Her shorts round her ankles and her knickers 'round her knees. She was tryin' to pull up her shorts and run at the same time...." .... (p. 318)*

This presents a picture where Kya is forced by her boyfriend into an unwanted sexual activity. Kya is depicted as being in an uncomfortable situation, as evidenced by her stumbling out toward her boat while partially undressed. Her attempts to pull up her shorts and run at the same time reveal her sense of urgency and fear. It highlights Kya's boyfriend's disrespect for her autonomy and boundaries as a woman, as he seeks to engage in sexual activity with her despite her obvious refusal and intentions to escape from the situation. Her boyfriend's direct action reflects a patriarchal culture where women's consent and boundaries are often underestimated which then leads to a maintenance of a cycle of dominance and control.

Beauvoir argues that women have been constructed as "the other", define in terms of men and strip of their independent identities. The two pieces of evidence from Delia Owens' novel demonstrate objectification of women's bodies within patriarchal norms and undermine their autonomy.

In (p.143), men view Kya linked with the shack as an object or as a target for conquest, proving patriarchal perspectives in which women are passive objects of men's desires. Kya's struggle to escape an unwanted sexual activity depicts how women often face lack autonomy to control their own bodies and being subjected to men's dominance and coercion (p.318). Beauvoir emphasizes that these experiences encourage the conquest of women, highlighting the need for women to fight and overcome patriarchal challenges in establishing their own identities.

Other than that, because Kya Clark lives alone in Marshland after being abandoned by her family, it creates rumors and judgments about her character from people in town. Plenty of them misjudge and speak negatively about her. This also reinforces Kya's role as a woman with limited educational opportunities, considering that one of the education field's priorities is to prioritize men.

*Finally, she looked up at him and said, "I can't read yo' note."*

*"Well sure, since you don't go to school. I forgot. All it said was..."*

*(p. 116)*

The conversation between a man and Kya demonstrates his dismissive and condescending attitude toward Kya's lack of education or her knowledge. The man's reaction explicitly shows that Kya's inability to read is the consequence of her gender and conditions, especially her background, emphasizing that education is not a first priority for women. Kya's struggle with literacy is not due

to a lack of ability but rather a lack of opportunity, which is a direct result of the patriarchal structure of her society.

In addition, the dismissive attitude of the man reflects dominant social views that undervalue women's intellectual abilities and perpetuate a patriarchal system that favors men's education. By dismissing Kya's lack of education, this man maintains stereotypes about women's intellectuals and normalizes a point that women are less deserving of educational opportunities which can be indicated to be a form of gender discrimination. A patriarchal perspective based on the conversation represents one that devalues women's potential and limits their intellectual growth.

*Those four years at university, he'd convinced himself that Kya could not fit in the academic world he sought. All through undergraduate...; after all, there were plenty of female distractions at Chapel Hill. (p. 210)*

This implies the patriarchal views that undermine women's academic potential and signifies how the man creates an assumption about Kya's inability to join into the academic life based on his own perceptions and prejudices. He has even convinced himself that Kya does not belong in the same academic field as he aspires to be. The character's assumption about Kya also represents a patriarchal perspective that undervalues women's intellectual abilities and limits their possibilities for education and achievements. Furthermore, the mention of "female distractions" is another belief in patriarchal society that views women as distractions rather than intellectual equals. This mindset not only limits women's opportunities for education and achievement but also strengthens a societal structure that marginalizes women and preserves gender inequalities.

The limitations placed on Kya's education impact herself-sense and identity as a woman, therefore Kya's journey is also linked in overcoming these educational limitations and asserting her intellectual capabilities. Existentialist feminism by Simone de Beauvoir criticizes patriarchal views that limit women's education and preserve gender inequalities. Education limitations for women, (p. 116 & p. 210) are correlated with patriarchal challenges by marginalizing them and undermining their potential.

This demonstrates the dismissive behavior toward Kya's lack of education, supports the idea that women's intellectual growth is undervalued and neglected in patriarchal society, (p.116). Another evidence in p. (210) further points the societal prejudices that undermine women's ability and potential for academic achievement. Beauvoir's existentialism and feminism encourages the

importance of confronting structural inequalities to empower women and eliminate oppressive gender norms, allowing for equal opportunities in education and beyond.

## 2. Importance of Independence and Autonomy

Patriarchal challenges urge women to fulfill society's expectations which leads to their struggle to look for independence and autonomy. The novel presents the struggle of patriarchal challenges and the desire for personal freedom through the experience of the main character, Kya Clark.

*Bit by bit, pictures of marriage and children formed in spite of her resistance. Probably some biological urge to push me into reproducing, she told herself. But why couldn't she have loved ones like everybody else? Why not? (Owens, 2018: 215)*

Despite her own resistance, society has expectations for women in terms of marriage and children. Kya perceives marriage and children as a "biological urge," resulting in her feeling pressured to adjust to reproduction. This also reflects the societal belief that women's role is just to reproduce and maintain a family. Furthermore, Kya questions why she could not have loved ones like everyone else, expressing her sincere desire for a meaningful relationship that builds companionship and connection as well as her dissatisfaction with society's expectations. Kya's struggle is the struggle many women face in reaching their goals for independence and autonomy with society's expectations of them.

*Suddenly Kya sat up and paid attention.... First, she flashed the proper sequence of dashes and dots, attracting male of her species. Then she flickered a different signal, and a male of a different species flew to her... the second male was convinced.... But suddenly the female firefly reached up, grabbed him with her mouth, and ate him....*  
*.... Kya knew judgment had no place here.... Biology sees right and wrong as the same color in different light. (Owens, 2018: 167)*

Furthermore, Kya observes a female firefly's mating ritual, in which she uses her signal to attract a first male and afterwards consume a male from another species. Kya's authority over her own body, especially her reproductive decisions, acts as a depiction in the mating ritual. Observing the female firefly, Kya sees a reflection of her own longing for independence and autonomy in a patriarchal society that strives to limit women. The female

firefly's ritual represents a rejection of passivity and an assertion of dominance, expressing the power of autonomy in a world ruled by survival and instinct. She recognizes that judgment has no place in this context, suggesting that she views the actions of the female firefly as a natural expression of independence and autonomy, free from societal expectations on women.

This draws attention to Kya's need to claim her independence and autonomy as a way of overcoming patriarchal challenges. Kya's resistance to social expectations to stick to patriarchal views of marriage, shows her desire for independence and autonomy. In p. (167) in which Kya observes and responds to the mating ritual of a female firefly, supports the issue by emphasizing the expression of natural control in the face of patriarchal society.

Kya's resistance to norms and questioning of the incident motivates her struggle to search for autonomy and the right to determine her own identity and life choices. Beauvoir's existentialist feminism confirms the importance of women freeing themselves from patriarchal challenges. Beauvoir also believes that societal expectations constantly dictate women's roles and limit their autonomy.

Additionally, Kya feels inspired to push herself even farther. She asserts and admits her right to freedom; therefore, she continues to prove something even more remarkable which clearly shows the great and progressive development in dealing with patriarchal challenges.

*... had been prejudiced against Kya because she had grown up in the marsh. He remembered Tate proudly showing him Kya's first book on shells and how... was taken aback by her scientific and artistic prowess. He had bought himself a copy of each of her books but hadn't mentioned that.... (p. 389)*

It shows how a man was first prejudiced and underestimated towards Kya, leading him to believe she was uneducated and had limited potential due to her background. The man's prejudice is the result of social bias, which connects a person's background and gender with their intellectual and social values. However, when he saw Kya's first book on shells, the man was taken aback by her potential. As a result, despite many prejudices based on her background and gender, Kya as a woman expresses her values in a patriarchal society by obtaining recognition for her scientific and artistic prowess. She also clearly demonstrates her identity as a woman from a background that is discriminated against by people.

*..., and Kya published seven more award-winning books. And though she was granted many*

*accolades-including an honorary doctorate from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.... (p. 429)*

Publishing seven award-winning books and receiving an honorary doctorate from a prestigious university shows the highest form of recognition that highlights her exceptional contributions toward science. All the achievements not only validate her outstanding success, but also represents a broader acceptance and recognition of her talents. Her accomplishment as an author shows her full potential. Kya's achievements confirm her ability to overcome challenges because of a patriarchal society and assert her independence and autonomy.

Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism emphasizes the importance of women's complete freedom in the form of independence and autonomy to overcome the challenges of patriarchal society. Kya's journey from being underestimated to becoming a respected author displays the existence of struggle and accomplishments. Beauvoir argues that women must resist patriarchal society's expectations and reclaim their autonomy in order to achieve liberation. Kya's scientific and artistic achievements serve as her resistance to social expectations that limit her potential due to her gender and background. Her success is an example of power and the importance of independence and autonomy.

### 3. Relationship with Nature and Patriarchal Challenges

Despite the patriarchal challenges she faces, the natural world provides Kya freedom, and a strong sense of identity. Her deep connection with nature which contrasts with the patriarchal challenges she encounters, shaping her with perspective and resilience.

*Her collections matured, categorized methodically by order, genus, species; by age according to the bone wear; by size in millimeters of feathers.... The science and art enter twined in each other's strengths...; weaving a masterpiece of knowledge and beauty that filled every corner of her shack. Her world. (p. 170)*

After overcoming all the patriarchal challenges, Kya discovers her freedom and identity through her relationship with nature. Her collections are organized by specific categories, reflecting her understanding and passion for the natural world. Each collection is more than simply a scientific curiosity; it is a work of art that draws on her own experiences and knowledge. This collection is also an art that is collected through her capabilities, which are often ignored or underestimated by society due to her gender and background.

The process of collecting, studying and organizing these natural collections allows her to create a space where she can exercise control over the challenges and express her creativity. Through her work, Kya challenges the patriarchal society that frequently marks women less capable of scientific or artistic achievement. Filled with categorized collections, her shack symbolizes the defiance against societal expectation and her assertion of intellectual autonomy.

*...altered her behavior until she was different from others, but it wasn't her fault she'd been alone. Most of what she knew, she'd learned from the wild. Nature had nurtured, tutored, and protected her when no one else would. (p. 430)*

It highlights how Kya's patriarchal experiences and the nurturing she received from nature influenced her behavior and knowledge. As her teacher and protector, the wild provides knowledge and lessons that no one else would. Kya's connection to nature empowers her as a woman and provides her with the skills and resilience she needs to in a patriarchal world where she is marginalized and judged. In this case, nature behaves as a contrast to the constraints of the patriarchal world, giving an environment for her to grow and learn without concern of social judgment.

The education given by nature also empowers her to develop skills and knowledge that are important for her survival and growth. Nature most of the time teaches her several abilities, such as to observe, analyze and understand the world around her, developing a sense of curiosity and intellectual fulfillment. This relationship between Kya and nature allows Kya to grow independently, shaping her into a strong, capable woman who could stand against patriarchal challenges.

*..., but life also taught her that ancient genes for survival still persist in some undesirable forms among the twists and turns of man's genetic code.*

*For Kya, it was enough to be part of this natural sequence as sure as the tides. She was bonded to her planet and its life in a way few people are. Rooted solid in this earth. Born of this mother. (p. 430)*

Kya's deep relationship with nature asserts her connection to the earth and its life cycles. This emphasizes how nature accepts her unconditionally, unlike the patriarchal society that seeks to confine and limit her. Her relationship with nature forces her sense of belonging and identity, independent of societal acceptance. Kya's understanding of survival and existence comes from

nature, which contrasts with all the patriarchal challenges she faces. The natural connection she builds empowers her to resist the limitations, nurturing her independence and self-resilience as a woman.

Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism emphasizes the importance of women asserting their autonomy and rejecting patriarchal challenges to achieve true identity empowerment. Nature provides Kya with an environment free from societal constraints, allowing her to develop her identity and skills independently. This autonomy and empowerment enable Kya to challenge the patriarchy that seeks to confine her, building a sense of self through her connection with the natural world.

In contrast to the disappointment and loneliness she experiences in human relationships, Kya finds freedom and empowerment in nature. It is through her deep connection that Kya finds a source of strength and identity that allows her to overcome the patriarchal challenges. Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism emphasizes the importance of women asserting their autonomy to achieve true identity empowerment.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Delia Owens' novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* portrays the patriarchal challenges Kya Clark faces, such as objectification, discrimination, and forced sexual activity. These challenges limit women's autonomy, viewing them as passive objects of men's desire and power. Kya's resilience and determination symbolize her resistance to patriarchy, aligning with Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, which highlights women's historical position as the "other." Kya's struggle against societal expectations like marriage and reproduction emphasizes themes of existentialist feminism by Simone de Beauvoir. Her journey from being underestimated to becoming a successful author underscores the importance of independence and autonomy in overcoming patriarchal constraints. Kya's accomplishments demonstrate the transformative power of rejecting societal limitations.

Moreover, Kya's relationship with nature provides freedom and identity amidst patriarchal challenges. Through her knowledge of nature, Kya asserts her intellectual autonomy, defying views that underestimate women. Nature supports her development, equipping her to navigate and challenge patriarchy. Kya's journey reflects Beauvoir's emphasis on women asserting autonomy for true empowerment. Her bond with nature helps her grow independently, shaping her into a strong woman representing existentialist feminism.

Since this research focuses solely on a female character, the author suggests that future research could explore the male perspective and how men also become

victims of patriarchy. This approach would consider the ways in which male characters experience patriarchal oppression differently from female characters. Investigating instances of internalized misogyny, toxic masculinity, and the limitations imposed by gender norms is essential. Specifically, examining the circumstances surrounding men's experiences could offer valuable insights into the complexities of masculinity and patriarchal violence.

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