

Embodied Fragility In Michele Robert's Novel In The Red Kitchen

Dilara Parslow

(English Language And Literature/ Izmir Demokrasi Universitesi, Turkey)

Abstract:

The article analyzes the notion of embodied fragility, and the concept of pater familias in Michele Robert's novel *In the Red Kitchen* through the framework of feminist theory. This research examines the role of the paternal figure by providing a historical basis from the Ancient Roman period, focusing on how patriarchal power governs women's bodies, shapes their subjectivity, and defines their social positions. In this context, the concept of pater familias is regarded not only as a hierarchical structure inside the family but also as an ideological framework that regulates women through social norms, domestic authority, and gender-specific expectations. In this context, this article examines how the paternal figure constructs women in the domestic sphere coding them with infirmity. This article specifically focuses on the female protagonists Minny and Flora. Minny's embodied fragility illustrates the impact of patriarchal oppressive practices on the psychology, demonstrating how the female subject is shaped by fragility, silence, and emotional disintegration. Conversely, Flora's rebellious stance against social and cultural conventions exemplifies subversion, challenging the established framework of this patriarchal system. Flora's role in spiritual traditions illustrates that the female subject is not only a passive entity, but also an active actor capable of redefining conventions.

Key Word: fragility; pater familias; subordination; silence; subversion

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I. Introduction

British author Michele Roberts, known for her feminist subversive works, often represents characters struggling to break free from patriarchal oppression in her novels, not through a linear liberation narrative, but through a fragmented, bodily, and memory-based process of subjectification. In her novels, Roberts often constructs plots within the framework of mythology, symbolism, and mystical events, thus providing a space for the female characters in her narratives to gain female agency. Roberts, who often incorporates patriarchal figures into her texts, emphasizes that the oppression of women does not stem from a single male figure, but rather has an ideological background. Roberts underscores that the plot structure in her novels, which does not center on a singular male character, necessitates that women's liberation be collaborative.

Her novel *In the Red Kitchen* written in 1990 centers around the issues of female subordination caused by the ideological results of patriarchal dynamics. *In the Red Kitchen* focuses on the lives of different women protagonists, set in different timelines. Flora as the spiritual medium holds seances in her mother's kitchen to channel the spirits where people gather around and experience telepathic and paranormal events. However, Roberts does not link this paranormal activity as a horrifying event, rather she constructs it as a space for women to transgress the boundaries of Victorian gender roles. Though Flora seeks ways to experience the transgression of gender roles through her spirit Hat, another female character Minny falls victim to the confinements of patriarchal society by her husband William who represents the Ancient Roman paternal figure within the domestic sphere.

II. Theoretical Framework

During the Roman era, gender relations changed from somewhat non-hegemonic to being strictly patriarchal and dominated by men. In this pivotal period preceding the emergence of Christianity, female identity is rigorously restricted within legal and social spheres. (Gardner 2). A significant juncture in the history of women's expulsion from public life to the private sphere is evident throughout the Ancient Roman era. The essence of male domination transitioned from a de facto power dynamic to a more institutionalized and structured organization that permeated all facets of society during the ancient Roman era, marking a key turning point (Saller 184). During this time, male hegemony was reinforced not only by their physical attributes but also by internalizing legal rules through social structures like the family. In Ancient Roman society, men were seen as the heads of households and as legal entities possessing total control over women and children, due to legal principles that defined the power dynamics of gender roles (Saller 182). Thus, patriarchy became the

fundamental principle of a broader social framework that encompassed not just individual relationships but also the legal system and Roman public life. Ancient Rome is significant as one of the oldest foundations of a historical process wherein male supremacy was institutionalized through laws, ethical standards, and cultural conventions, while women were excluded from the public domain and confined to the private sector. This system reinforced gender-based power disparities and laid the groundwork for later socio-political frameworks that sustained male supremacy. Within this framework, it could be inferred that the Roman legal system functions not only as a mechanism of government but also as a cultural instrument that embeds patriarchal beliefs into the core of both public and private domains. The Roman age formalized institutional gender roles that marginalized women by excluding them from civic and intellectual life (Grubbs xi). This ancient Roman approach, wherein law serves as a mechanism to perpetuate social norms, exemplifies how patriarchal order governs both public and private domains. The patriarchal tenets of ancient Roman law, concerning the restriction of women's property, inheritance, and citizenship rights, facilitated the institutionalization of gender-based hierarchies. This illustrates that male domination was both cultural and structurally institutionalized. Consequently, Roman law can be regarded as a framework that established the patriarchal underpinnings for the socio-political structures observed in subsequent Western countries, legitimizing them by depicting them as inherent and unchangeable.

Roman society established conditions that excluded women from the public sphere by regulating private life through the institutionalization of the family. It can be inferred that the consolidation of patriarchal authority within Roman family structures was strategically achieved through the elevation and legal codification of paternal roles predating ancient ages, which featured matriarchy. Roman law recognizes the family structure as the foundation of social order, encompassing not only biological kinship but also economic, legal, and ideological connections. The idealized male-dominated hierarchy of the Roman state is exemplified by the *pater familias*, who maintains supreme control and dominion over family members.

The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* gives the following definitions for *familia*: 1. All persons subject to the control of one man, whether relations, freedmen or slaves, a household, b. PATER, MATER, FILIUS, FILIA [-familias]. 2. The slaves of a household. 3. A group of servants domiciled in one place. 4. A body of persons closely associated by blood or affinity, family. 5. A school (of philosophy, etc.). 6. (leg.) Estate (consisting of the household and household property). (Saller et al 75)

Richard Saller elucidates the term *paterfamilias*, defined as the patriarchal head of a household, which is emblematic of the patriarchal structure characteristic of ancient Roman families and society, as discussed in both academic and popular contexts (Saller 182). The *paterfamilias* held *dominium potestas* over slaves and *patria potestas* over children. The family head possessed absolute authority over all property, slaves, and dependents, including the capacity to inflict harm and mistreatment upon those under his dominion. In Roman law, the legal and social authority the patriarch wielded over his biological and adopted offspring was termed *patria potestas*. Similarly, this comprehensive power encompasses 'manus,' signifying dominance over the woman. The term "manus" denotes the wife's subjugation to her husband's legal dominion; hence, marriage subjects the spouse to his ultimate power and control. Nonetheless, "manus did not serve the same purpose as a legal concept, and the gender bias of the jurists favoring males did not necessitate equivalent consistency regarding females" (Saller 193). This assertion illustrates that the concept of *manus* operates more as a device of social control than as a legal framework, revealing chronic inconsistencies concerning women. Law fundamentally perceives men as subjects and women as objects delineated by property relations; hence, the idea of *manus*, which governs a woman's transfer from her father's authority to her husband's, is not applied with the same logical rigor as the legal concepts pertinent to men. The concept of law thus transforms into an epistemic domain that perpetuates male domination, rendering this distinction more than only a technical legal issue. In matters concerning women, equitable and consistent legal criteria applicable to men are capriciously disregarded for moral, cultural, or religious justifications. This demonstrates that "woman" was perceived in Roman law as an individual responsible for maintaining the moral balance of society rather than as a legal entity. In short, the statement asserts that women were not fully integrated into the rational domain of law within the patriarchal legal framework; instead, their standing was diminished to a quasi-legal, quasi-moral condition that reinforced male dominance.

The dynamics between *patria potestas* and *manus* perpetuate the patriarchal order in Roman society by shaping legal, social, and economic functions (Dixon 90). Male dominance is entrenched in these processes, evident in both domestic and societal contexts. In Rome, the *pater familias* functioned as the head of the home and a microcosm of the Roman government. Beyond the private sphere, *patria potestas*, or paternal authority, also encompassed a venerated emblem of the political and ecclesiastical framework (Fraschetti 130). The amalgamation of religious devotion with parental discipline, encapsulated in the concept of *pietas*, which denotes reverence for the gods, ancestors, and the state, provided a theological rationale for masculine authority. The father's authority transformed into a sacred conveyance of a cultural tradition.

As men secured territory and governed the Roman Empire, women served as the custodians of the state's perpetuation. Social domains were distinctly delineated; a man's realm encompassed the public arena; a woman's, her domestic space. The state's politics were the domain of men, while child-rearing and familial care were responsibilities of a Roman matron (Takacs xi).

Paternal power in Rome, although shown as part of a natural social order, can be regarded as an intellectual creation of the patriarchal system that sustains the continuance of patriarchal lineage. The authority of the *pater familias* might be perceived as the result of a narrative that legitimizes male supremacy as a divine mandate, rather than as a kind of power inside the family structure. The notion that paternal power constitutes a divine obligation legitimizes and affirms the patriarchal system as the norm. The apex of this conceptual transformation is the emperor's assumption of the title *pater patriae*, or father of the fatherland, which enhances masculine authority from the home realm to the public and political domains. The apex of this conceptual transformation is the emperor's assumption of the title *pater patriae*, or father of the fatherland, which enhances masculine authority from the home realm to the public and political domains (Fraschetti 91). The paternal archetype is thus reconstituted as a political mythology, emblematic of Rome's gendered and hierarchical power dynamics, alongside domestic order.

The persistent guardianship of women, a stereotype acknowledged in Roman law as 'infirmitas sexus', or the weakness of the sex, was originally established as a mechanism to maintain male dominance over familial assets and female autonomy. Subsequently, it reinforced the notion that women are intrinsically weak beings requiring guidance in matters of mental confusion. This system was not confined to Roman law; instead, it proliferated across other legal frameworks as a language that endorsed normative practices aimed at restricting the financial and legal freedoms of women.

With rare exceptions, all Roman women were perpetually constrained in their ability to engage in autonomous legal actions. Authority to act must be acquired from, or conferred upon, an individual—father, husband, or guardian (tutor)" Gardner (9). Susan Dixon elucidates the creation of gender stereotypes by emphasizing the societal preference for specific words and the network of semantic linkages they establish with other terms. Dixon also identifies comparable patterns in English "'infirmitas' = infirmity, 'fragilitas' = fragility" (74). The semantic coherence between the Latin terms *infirmitas* and *fragilitas* and the contemporary English phrases *infirmity* and *fragility* underscores a profoundly entrenched cultural construction of gender stereotypes. The discursive choices in ancient Roman legal discourse, which diminished patriarchal liberty by instituting some constraints to safeguard familial inheritance or structure, demonstrate a nuanced continuation of gender stereotypes over time. Simultaneously with female weakness, a novel idea emerged as '*infirmitas consilii*,' signifying female impairment of judgment (Dixon 80). The stereotyped image of Roman women was established not just within social realms but also within legal sectors.

Women were socially and legally subservient to a paternal authority, usually their father, in both ancient Greece and Rome. Unless expressly liberated through a certain legal mechanism, a Roman citizen, regardless of gender, was born under the *potestas* of the *paterfamilias* and remained so until his death (Dixon 34). However, this reliance was rarely broken in the case of women, which served to further solidify the notion of women's ongoing subjugation. Although those under the father's authority became *sui iuris* (legally autonomous) after his death, cultural and legal norms frequently persisted in limiting women's autonomy.

Within this context Janet Gardner argues that women are victimized by two types of gender-based marginalization. A woman's role in the family is restricted to her biological role as a mother; she is legally subordinate and not permitted to possess any authority in her husband's family (Gardner 77). Outside of the family, women are not allowed to participate in significant legal interactions that are exclusive to male *pater familias*, even though they may have limited legal status comparable to male citizens as heads of their own familia. Garner identifies the exclusion of women from the legal and public domains with the legal authority, *tutela* over autonomous individuals.

Early feminists supported the notion that women's oppression derived from the way gender is constructed in modern societies and set out to eliminate gender as a meaningful social category. They rejected the dichotomy between female and male values as a sexist notion. One of feminism's basic positions, as defined by feminist thinkers, was that "biology is not destiny, and that male and female roles are learnt indeed that they are male political constructs that ensure power and superior status for men" (Koedt et al. 70). The narratives that depict female subordination that are constructed by men posit that women do not articulate their own experiences directly but are instead represented and interpreted by a male-dominated discourse. This secondary status pertains to the woman's demotion from the role of subject to that of object. The woman relinquishes her role as the architect of her narrative, instead embodying the male gaze, anxieties, aspirations, and ideological requirements. According to Kate Millett gender hierarchy is 'perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power' (Millett 25). As Millett asserts, patriarchy is not simply an inequity evident in personal relationships, but a systemic power structure that infiltrates all societal institutions.

III. Female Silence And Obedience In In The Red Kitchen

Minnie in the novel reflects the type of a silenced, obedient woman who has been subjectified to a secondary position within society. Minny's husband William, contrary to Minny, portrays the ancient Roman paterfamilias figure who regulates and controls the dynamics within the domestic sphere. At this juncture, Minny is depicted as a woman who accepts to be governed by her husband. Although Robert's some female characters in the novel cannot construct female agency, Flora as the Victorian spiritualist establishes an alternate spiritual space that transgresses the borders of domestic sphere. The female medium Flora, endowed with an agency that transcends the boundaries of the body, violates the codes of silence, passivity, and confinement to the private sphere that patriarchal norms impose on womanhood; thus, it makes visible that gender is not a fixed essence, but a historically conditioned and renegotiable social construct. The strict dichotomies that underpin patriarchal order are undermined by spiritualism, both as a cultural practice and an epistemic framework throughout the Victorian era. It creates a kind of ontological doubt that goes beyond metaphysics and starts to challenge the notion that gender is a stable, natural, and biologically determined identity by obfuscating the distinctions between the spiritual and the material.

In this way, the book parallels Simone de Beauvoir's fundamental assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" implying that femininity is a position created via social and discursive processes rather than an essence based in the body (*The Second Sex* 330). Aligning with Beauvoir's statement, Minny as the survivor of a child loss is stuck between her household duties, maternal trauma and Victorian gender norms. Minny's speech in the novel demonstrates how Victorian patriarchy functioned as both an inward process of subjectification and an exterior system of oppression. "I would not be your daughter if I did not retain a strong feeling of my duty", where her duty corresponds with the ideals of Victorian housewives, can be examined as an example of how the language of moral responsibility and emotional commitment is used in order to establish Victorian female identity (*In the Red Kitchen* 5). In this case, the idea of duty serves as both an ideological tool that helps women to absorb the patriarchal system and an individual ethical position. In this way, normative expectations rather than her own preferences have molded Minny's subject's self-disciplined structure. Minny's speech demonstrates how patriarchal power functions as a disciplinary regime ingrained in the subject as well as an external oppressive instrument.

As a result, the subject molds themselves in accordance with norms without requiring outside supervision. It is possible to interpret Minny's declaration, "I would not be your daughter if I did not retain a strong feeling of my duty," as a verbal manifestation of this internalized discipline (*In the Red Kitchen* 5). In a similar vein, Minny's statements that "my husband must be the judge of my actions" and "he stands between me and the world" indicate that the female subject fully surrenders her agency to the masculine figure (*In the Red Kitchen* 5). At this stage, Minny can no longer be an active subject directly interacting with the environment; rather, she is an entity that men represent, guides, and controls. This structure shows that a woman's identity is defined by her connection with a man rather than as an independent subject. The woman acquires meaning through the man's point of reference rather than as a subject in and of herself, as Simone de Beauvoir noted in her analysis situating the woman as the subordinate sex. This secondary position is voluntarily accepted in Minny's discourse where she internalizes her passive agency. "Allow me to remind you, dearest Mamma, that my husband must be the judge of my actions. He stands between me and the world; he is my counsellor and my guide" (33). The statement generates a potent patriarchal metaphor. The husband serves not only as a partner but also as a conduit between the woman and the public domain. This discussion reflects the portrayal of men as protective, leading, and logical figures, while women are shown as passive entities requiring direction, in accordance with Victorian gender theory. Minny's employment of the terms "counsellor" and "guide" portrays masculine authority not as tyrannical, but as a comforting and valid framework. Consequently, patriarchal dominance becomes hidden inside the narrative of affection, safeguarding, and mentorship. Minny's letter to her mother can also be interpreted via the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the woman as the "other." Minny does not establish her own subjectivity as an autonomous identity, but rather through the dominance of the male figure. Minny's connection to the world is indirect, mediated through a masculine perspective where she admits her gendered performance as a natural and unquestionable condition of womanhood. This scenario indicates that the woman is stifling her own voice and internalizing patriarchal speech as her own truth. The notion of "passive agency" is significant in this context. Minny is not completely silent; rather, she articulates, advocates, and justifies her stance. This discursive effort does not facilitate liberation; instead, it serves as a technique of self-discipline that sustains the patriarchal structure. Minny thereby becomes not just the subject of patriarchy but also its perpetuator where she transforms her submission into a self-regulating performance of ideal femininity. In this sense, Minny becomes both the subject and the reproducer of patriarchal discourse, articulating her own secondary position through the language of devotion and moral duty.

Minny's acknowledgment of patriarchal standards as a logical extension of her identity demonstrates how the internalized discipline crystallized in Minny's discourse functions, whereas Flora is a radical rejection of this process. The social advice that Minny reflects towards Flora indicating that she "ought to get married..."

someone as pretty as you should have no trouble," makes it evident how the female body is positioned within a heteronormative framework; marriage is directly tied to reproduction, and beauty is linked to marriage (*In the Red Kitchen* 76). This discourse can be claimed as an everyday expression of patriarchal reasoning, which holds that marriage and motherhood are the only ways to fully embody womanhood. Flora's intervention becomes crucial at this point: "I'll never marry... I don't want to be a wife or a mother" (*In the Red Kitchen* 76). Flora's assertion reflects a blatant rejection of the disciplinary system that links the female body to reproduction, not just a personal decision. The rejection of female reproduction carries the meaning of a structural intervention, as Shulamith Firestone contends that biological reproduction has historically been a fundamental mechanism determining women's social position (36). Tromp highlights that the dissolution of gender boundaries in spiritualist séance performances is most apparent when spirits communicate through a medium; in this process, the medium's body shifts from a vessel of a singular, stable identity to a performative arena of diverse voices, fluid identities, and bodily transformations. In this perspective, Flora's mediumship can be interpreted as both a supernatural activity and a liminal area of resistance, allowing the feminine body to partially transcend the patriarchal system of signification. The intrusion of alternative voices during the session undermines the patriarchal narrative that seeks to define the female subject through motherhood and heteronormative femininity, thereby converting the female body from a regulated biological fate into a transient, multifaceted, and boundary-defying discursive realm (84). The spiritualist séances in the novel demonstrates that it functions in the novel as a performative arena that disintegrates the subject's established gender identity. As previously articulated, Flora's mediumship creates a liminal space of disruption against the patriarchal disciplinary regime that constrains the female body to motherhood and conventional femininity. Flora, by being a vessel to the spirit of Hattie, transgresses the boundaries of time, space and gender.

Which spirit is this? Will you tell us your name? The glass knocks back and forth between the shiny cards, the big black letters. HA. HA. HA. HA! HA HA!

The glass is irritated at my stupidity. It starts again, darting back and forth across the circle of cards. HATTIE. KING. HATTIE KING. (*In the Red Kitchen* 44)

In this context, the letter-by-letter revelation of the name 'HATTIE KING' illustrates that the body and voice are no longer attributed to a singular subject. Hattie communicates indirectly through the 'darting back and forth' motion of the glass among the letters; hence, the dialogue is generated not by a coherent and singular entity, but through a fragmented, delayed, and corporeal enactment. This circumstance positions the medium's body beyond established identity classifications, rendering it as a transient discursive conduit. The incessant "HA. HA. HA." sound can be read as providing an unsettling role. This laughter can be examined as reflecting the expression of a spiritual being and a hideous disruption of rational and authoritarian frameworks of patriarchal meaning-making. The intrusion of other voices into the Flora's body during the session undermines the effort of patriarchal ideologies to constrict woman to a unique, manageable, and interpretable entity. The delineation of the speaking subject becomes indistinct, leaving the inquiries regarding the ownership of the voice, the corporeal embodiment, and the origin of the discourse unresolved. Consequently, the spiritualist performance elucidates that gender is not a fixed identity, but rather a performative construct that circulates and is conveyed among bodies. The narrator's personification of the glass as "irritated at my stupidity" subverts the epistemic authority of the topic. The human subject is no longer pivotal to meaning; rather, the glass, as an objectified instrument, assumes a leading and controlling role. This reversal undermines the Victorian rationality's comprehension of the core subject, simultaneously converting the female medium's body into a liminal realm where the dualities of human/spirit, subject/object, and masculine/feminine are obliterated. Therefore, the legitimacy conferred by spiritualism indicates that gender is not solely a natural category rooted in biological distinctions, but rather a power structure generated and sustained under historic circumstances.

Stay still, don't move so much. It's just a medical examination, his cool fingers reaching deeper in, deeper, harder, she lifts, she rises, she moans, she collapses. On the sofa next door, Flora whimpers in her trance. Hattie's not a virgin anyway, William discovers that, she's a bad girl, she's shameless. There's no need to be ashamed. William sits beside Flora on the sofa and takes her pulse, holds her hand in his. Good girl, Flora, well done. Flora knows nothing. Flora would never do what Hattie does. Flora is a good girl. (*In the Red Kitchen* 123)

As Flora constructed an image of a young Victorian lady who is not confined into any patriarchal oppression or a male guidance, she falls a victim into it. Hat's character embodies the patriarchal archetype of a dangerous woman. Although Flora through Hat transgresses the limits of gender roles, she cannot escape from it. She is subjected to the examination and evaluation of restricted masculine power, rendered an object of scrutiny and judgment. The pattern of 'lifting, rising, moaning, collapsing' illustrates Hattie's reactions with intensity, while concurrently implying that the male gaze objectifies her as a sexual display (*In the Red Kitchen* 123). William's realization that Hattie is no longer a chaste girl exposes the patriarchal perception of the valuation of a woman's body. Hattie's portrayal as a sexually corrupted girl arises not from her intrinsic nature, but from the depiction of female sexuality that is ultimately shaped by male dominance. Hattie illustrates the

manifestation of female desire and cultural dynamics under a patriarchal framework concerning shame and disdain.

IV. Conclusion

To conclude, the novel *In the Red Kitchen* encompasses how the patriarchal ideology functions within the domain of domestic realm through female fragility, female infirmity and paternal authority. Upon providing the characters of Flora, William and Minny, the novel reflects the reconstruction of female identity in terms of patriarchal codes implying female subordination and her secondary position within society. Although Flora somehow tries to resist patriarchal oppression, her resistance cannot escape the boundaries defined by the patriarchal structures. William's paternal demeanor, seemingly protecting yet fundamentally authoritarian, perpetuates the pater familias philosophy, relegating women to dependent domestic roles. Minny's position within this frame demonstrates that patriarchal values are internalized not only by men but also within the female experience. Consequently, the novel illustrates that women are not merely oppressed entities within the patriarchal framework, but also individuals molded by and, to some degree, perpetuated by this discourse. The female experience is represented through the conflict between emancipation and internalized subservience.

The primary reason of Flora's resistance stays ineffective is portrayed by the failure to cultivate an independent subjectivity capable of transcending the patriarchal system. Although Flora may intermittently exhibit a covert defiance towards male authority, through cultural standards, or feminine conventions, this resistance is ultimately constrained by patriarchal limitations. In other words, she does not entirely dismiss the system's rationale; instead, she is compelled to function within its parameters. The notion of *infirmitas sexus* specifically situates Flora's body and identity within the realm of femininity, deemed intrinsically delicate. As a result, Flora's thoughts and behaviors are perpetually scrutinized under paternal oversight. William's ostensibly protective demeanor is significant in this setting, since his control manifests not through explicit oppression, but through narratives of care, guidance, and protection where she learns how to be a good girl. Therefore, Flora's capacity for subjectification is once more constrained by the guise of patriarchy's benevolence.

As a result, the novel does not contend that female resistance is unattainable; rather, it illustrates the significant influence of patriarchal rhetoric on the female subject. Flora's failure is not a personal deficiency, but a result of the historical shaping of female identity by male-centric systems. Consequently, although Flora opposes patriarchy, she remains ultimately constrained by its language, norms, and power dynamics.

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