The Interplay of Female Repression and Violent Desire in Elfriede Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher*

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Violence is a widely explored interdisciplinary topic in the humanities and social sciences, including fields such as literature, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and political science. In the field of literature, Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2004, is renowned for her portrayal of various forms of violence, particularly in relation to gender issues. She is especially known for her focus on women's experiences and her sharp critique, which has established her as a prominent figure in literary discussions.

Jelinek's novel *The Piano Teacher* is one of the most renowned literary works exploring how patriarchal society controls women's bodies, emotions, and desires. With a sharp tone, she portrays this oppression as suffocating and deeply damaging, even to the point of distorting women's psychological states and cognitive patterns. Jelinek demonstrates this through the protagonist's violent desire to self-harm, to harm others, and to be harmed. This vividly illustrates the tension between suppressed inner desires and external constraints, and the destructive consequences that arise when these forces collide.

In light of this, this article will analyze the relationship between repression and violence in *The Piano Teacher* within a gender framework, to understand how Jelinek portrays oppressed women on the one hand, and her patriarchal critique on the other hand. Through this, this study aims to reveal the systems of control and resistance in the novel's depiction of gendered power dynamics.

Keywords: Elfriede Jelinek, feminism, violence, sexuality, sadomasochism

1. Jelinek's Engagement with Gender and Violence

Elfriede Jelinek is renowned for her sharp critique and her portrayal of various forms of violence, particularly in relation to gender issues and women's experiences. She usually explores violence and oppression within a gender framework, as they are closely connected to her personal experiences and feminist position. Jelinek grew up with a mentally ill father who was institutionalized early, leaving her under the strict control of her domineering mother. These oppressive experiences, marked by emotional isolation and her father's early death, shaped the conflicted emotions that later emerged in her critical portrayals of gender and family dynamics.

Therefore, it's not surprising that elements like power, violence, sexuality, and gender permeate Jelinek's works, such as *Women as Lovers* (1975), *Lust* (1989), *Greed* (2000), and, of course, her most famous and frequently discussed novel, the semi-autobiographical *The Piano Teacher* (1983). In this novel, Erika, a stern piano teacher in her late thirties, is emotionally stunted by years of domination from her controlling mother. After her mentally ill father died during her youth, Erika lived under her mother's strict rule, which stifled her emotional and sexual development. Trapped in this oppressive bond, she turns to voyeurism and explicit material as outlets. When a young and gifted student begins to pursue her, Erika tries to maintain this relationship while also seeking to satisfy her long-repressed sexual needs through sadomasochism. However, this eventually drives their relationship out of control.

The Piano Teacher explores the tension between the protagonist's outward conformity and inner rebellion, revealing how violence and oppression are deeply embedded in everyday life, affecting not only the physical but also the psychological realms. The interplay of female repression and violent desire in this novel is presented in an intense and explicit manner, particularly in its sexual dimensions, leading many readers to feel discomfort and repulsion, with some even going so far as to label it perverse (Lee, 2019, p. 106). However, *The Piano Teacher* has received both acclaim and criticism, as it, like other portrayals of violence, reflects traits observable in certain individuals and underscores real social concerns. Therefore, such themes should not be dismissed as irrelevant or reduced to mere literary taboos.

Taking into account both the novel's literary significance and its personal relevance to the author, this article explores the relationship between repression and violence in this controversial work through a gendered lens. It aims to examine how Jelinek both portrays oppressed women and articulates a critique of patriarchy. The analysis begins by examining the representations of female repression and violent desire separately, followed by a discussion of their interplay and the meanings it generates. In doing so, the study seeks to uncover the mechanisms of control and resistance embedded within the novel's depiction of gendered power relations.

2. The Mechanisms of Familial and Social Oppression

In the novel, Erika is primarily oppressed by her mother, Mrs. Kohut, a domestic abuser who reflects women's contradictions under patriarchy, and by her student and romantic partner, Walter Klemmer, who embodies patriarchy. While the story explores gendered power among the three, Erika is shown not only as a victim but also as a perpetrator and bystander in violent acts (Becker, 2021, p. 166). This complex identity grants her a degree of agency, enabling her to challenge dominant narratives and highlight the complexity of the issues at stake.

The novel's first half focuses on the oppressive dynamic between Erika and her mother, Mrs. Kohut, who exerts total control over Erika's life, from her schedule and finances to her appearance and social interactions. Erika must avoid makeup and decorative clothing, and refrain from intimacy with men, "so that ultimately fewer and fewer people wish to see Erika, or even speak to her." (Jelinek, 1999, p. 6) However, her mother doesn't care, believing Erika should devote herself entirely to piano practice, which she sees as a means of social advancement (Becker, 2021, p. 180). Therefore, despite being an adult, Erika remains infantilized, treated as her mother's possession in a dysfunctional, master-servant relationship (Becker, 2021, p. 173).

Mrs. Kohut's dominance over Erika intensifies after the father's absence, but it stems from her own position as a middle-class Austrian woman who is "economically powerless, isolated and without social recognition" (Kosta, 1994, p. 222). Her control at home reflects her lack of agency in a patriarchal society, where women are often the dominated other. As a result, she views Erika's upbringing as a strategy for social mobility, using her daughter's success for her own empowerment. Thus, motherhood becomes a tool for self-interest, as Jelinek reveals maternal self-sacrifice to be a form of manipulative control (Kosta, 1994, p. 222-223).

Mrs. Kohut's economic dependence on Erika makes the daughter a surrogate for the absent father (Becker, 2021, p. 171-172), symbolized by their bed-sharing at night. Although the father's absence seems to reduce male influence, patriarchy continues to function invisibly, revealing its deep-rooted power. This marks the origin of the mother-daughter entanglement (Kosta, 1993, p. 257), reflecting how patriarchal structures persist by compelling women to maintain the system even without male presence.

The values Mrs. Kohut imparts to Erika and the ways she constrains her reflect society's traditional expectations and conservative norms for women, thereby making her a transmitter of social norms within the patriarchal system. Although Mrs. Kohut's control over Erika hinders her individual development and reinforces the patriarchal structure, and her internalization of patriarchal values makes her complicit in oppressing other women, she is not simply a villain. Rather, the mother simultaneously embodies the dual role of both victim and perpetrator under the patriarchal system, imbuing the work with profound tragic dimensions.

The epitome of the mother's negative influence on her daughter manifests most clearly in her approach to sexuality, as in the eyes of the pleasure-hostile mother, sex is merely a tool for procreation, having nothing to do with pleasure. However, even though Erika has to some extent inherited her mother's viewpoints, she still feels attraction to men and recognizes her own sexual desires. Consequently, she does not know how to interact with men or express her sexual needs appropriately, which demonstrates that Mrs. Kohut "inscribes her laws and needs onto her daughter's body to the extent that Erika is fixed within the matrix of maternal control, where she stagnates" (Kosta, 1994, p. 221). This is well illustrated by the unusual relationship Erika later develops with Klemmer.

Klemmer vividly embodies hegemonic masculinity, which is evident not only in his predatory pursuit of Erika (Swales, 2000, p. 440–441) but more prominently in two aspects: his emphasis on physical power and his dominance over women. Klemmer loves canoeing and shows highly competitive, victory-oriented traits in his athletic pursuits. However, his desire for dominance and competition transforms into violence whenever he feels frustrated or perceives a threat to his superior status, which is obvious in his displacement of anger onto Erika and his acts of violence against her.

The fact that his repeated loss of control is closely linked to sexual matters suggests that Klemmer particularly cares about taking the lead in sexual affairs when it comes to his dominance over women. For example, when he and Erika attempt to have sex in the cleaning staff's cabinet, the encounter ends in failure due to his inability to achieve an erection, causing him to experience the "terrors of impotence" (Jelinek, 1999, p. 244). Throughout the process, Klemmer becomes increasingly anxious and agitated, continuously making crude attempts without being willing to give up, until Erika vomits. After the failure becomes a reality, Klemmer reacts aggressively, directing his

anger toward Erika. He continues to humiliate Erika before ultimately leaving her: “The man tells her she stinks! Does she realize she stinks? He repeats the sentence several times because it sounds so good, and he addresses her in the polite form: Do you realize you stink, Frau Erika?” (Jelinek, 1999, p. 246)

In the novel’s climax, Klemmer’s frustration culminates in violence: “Klemmer smashes his right fist, not too hard and not too soft, into Erika’s belly.” (Jelinek, 1999, p. 266). Although this act reasserts traditional gendered power (Kosta, 1994, p. 229), it also reveals his insecurity due to his inferiority to Erika in talent, income, and status. To preserve his masculinity, Klemmer mocks her age, reducing her to an undesirable, middle-aged woman: “A woman in her condition has nothing to expect from him in regard to love.” (Jelinek, 1999, p. 268)

The escalating violence in Klemmer’s behavior reveals a fundamentally unequal and distorted power dynamic between him and Erika, compelling her to remain in a passive, traditionally female role. This reflects Erika’s predicament: Facing her mother’s suffocating control, her attempts to seek support outside the family are still met with suppression. This predicament highlights the systemic oppression of women under patriarchal structures and demonstrates the limited agency afforded to them within normative gender roles.

3. The Violent Desire to Self-Harm, to Harm Others, and to Be Harmed

Although Erika’s role as a victim in the novel is clear to see, she also shows aggressive behavior. While this can be seen as a form of resistance, the violence she inflicts is directed not only at others but also at herself. In addition to these acts, Erika derives pleasure from being subjected to violence, which explains her interest in sadomasochism and reflects her complex violent desires. Through this, violence serves to delegitimize social constraints by exposing their oppressive nature, prompting a critical re-examination of the myths – deeply rooted traditional beliefs and ideologies – that sustain them, ultimately facilitating their deconstruction (Becker, 2021, p. 167).

The severity of Erika’s violent behavior varies according to her underlying psychological motivations. For example, on the streetcar, she lashes out at strangers in the crowd and “beats into a duster of work-smeared people. If the trolley is mobbed, say around six in the evening, she can injure a lot of people just by swinging around.” (Jelinek, 1999, p. 15). This aggression stems from disgust and fear triggered by forced closeness, and the crowded space allows her to act out anonymously. Such outbursts reveal the effects of her mother’s control, which isolates Erika and alienates her from society (Havryliv, 2005, p. 17).

In another scene, Erika responds to a romantic rival by slipping “a deliberately smashed tumbler into the girl’s coat pocket” (Jelinek, 1999, p. 167). This escalation into more severe violence occurs as Erika, increasingly drawn to Klemmer, becomes consumed by jealousy. This suggests that men and romantic relationships do hold appeal for her, unlike for her mother, who appears entirely detached from such desires. Through this aggressive act, the issue of women oppressing other women in a patriarchal society is once again brought to light. It also becomes evident that, for Erika, physical violence is, among other things, a medium of revenge.

Regarding Erika’s self-mutilation, the most obvious manifestation is her cutting herself with a razor blade, and this kind of self-harm usually happens after her conflicted desires and sexual urges are triggered by encounters with men. The most significant scene occurs when Erika cuts her vagina in

the bathroom at home: “SHE sits down in front of the magnifying side of the shaving mirror; spreading her legs, she makes a cut, magnifying the aperture that is the doorway into her body. […] Her hobby is cutting her own body.” (Jelinek, 1999, p. 86)

This scene simultaneously reveals Erika’s curiosity about the female body and a certain degree of self-hatred. Her desire to explore the essence of her female body, which “is dreadfully alien to her” (Jelinek, 1999, p. 87), suggests that femininity is something entirely unfamiliar to her, leaving her confused and helpless with related issues. Moreover, Erika’s mother imposes her own thoughts and will on her, making her feel obligated to meet her expectations. However, Erika is unable to do so, failing to become a concert pianist and ending up merely as a piano teacher. As a result, she is consumed by guilt (Dickson, 2023, p. 9) and remains trapped in this controlling relationship with her mother (Fricke, 2000, p. 76). Since Erika cannot truly express anger or seek revenge against her abusive mother, she turns the blame inward and engages in self-harm (Dickson, 2023, p. 2).

Now that the vagina is an important symbol of femininity that Erika shares with her mother, her act can be interpreted as expressing her desire “to separate from the maternal aegis” (Kosta, 1994, p. 227). This suggests that the violence she inflicts upon herself here differs; it’s not merely a instrument of revenge, but rather a tool of exploration that is simultaneously destructive and liberating. However, this tool happens to be her father’s relic, making it the instrument of separation provided by the fetishized missing father (Kosta, 1994, p. 227). In light of this, it’s believed that Erika’s self-mutilation conveys the message that “the male picks up where the mother leaves off” (Kosta, 1994, p. 227) and represents further masochistic submission.

Erika’s preference for sadomasochism, which is especially evident in her identification with both the sadist and the masochist when watching pornography (Wilke, 1993, p. 132), is not only the core and most important motif of this novel, but also embodies the multi-layered complexity of gender issues within patriarchal structures. In a letter to Klemmer, she makes her request: “Hogtie her, bind her up as thoroughly as he can – solidly, intensely, artfully, cruelly, tormentingly, cunningly. He should bore his knees into her abdomen, if you'll be so kind.” (Jelinek, 1999, p. 215)

Erika’s sadomasochistic tendencies stem from her mother’s oppressive control, which ingrained obedience and shaped her into a people-pleaser (Kosta, 1994, p. 219). This domestication evolves into a desire for submission, where love equates to dependence (Kosta, 1994, p. 228). Paradoxically, sadomasochism also offers her a sense of agency: By choosing how she is punished, Erika transforms passive control into an act of self-determination. Her submission thus becomes a means of seeking recognition, love, and autonomy.

4. The Confrontation Between Voluntary Violence and Patriarchy

Erika sees Klemmer as a potential liberator, hoping he will fulfill her desire to be dominated and help her achieve self-liberation. However, the role she assigns him clashes with patriarchal norms. Although Klemmer is allowed to play the role of perpetrator, Erika sets the rules, effectively instrumentalizing him and subverting traditional power dynamics, thereby challenging the phallic presumption (Wilke, 1993, p. 127). This attempted reversal agitates Klemmer, who finds the scripted submission absurd, as shown in his reaction to her letter: “She wants to give him orders! And he’s supposed to obey her on the spot.” (Jelinek, 1999, p. 216–217)

Thus, Klemmer's perception of Erika changes, not only because sadomasochism does not align with his desires, but also because her voluntary submission undermines the thrill he finds in asserting dominance. Erika's requests leave him not with a sense of achievement but with repulsion, which grows into frustration and humiliation he can't tolerate. In response, he reasserts his masculinity through rape and violence that exceed Erika's intentions, seeking to restore traditional gender power and reject her attempt at rebellion. This reveals how essential dominance is to male identity in patriarchal systems and highlights the precarious position women occupy within them.

Klemmer's violent behavior toward Erika causes her severe trauma and makes her feel that as a woman, nothing she does is right. She clearly wants to take action and has a certain degree of agency, yet she can't fulfill the ideal of femininity desired by society (Becker, 2021, p. 176), nor can she simply play the role of a passive victim. Therefore, as Martin Becker describes, either Erika is a woman and subordinate, or self-determined and therefore not a woman (Becker, 2021, p. 178). Erika's predicament is clearly reflected in the ending, in which she experiences a kind of despair and intense anger, so that she intends to take a knife to the Conservatory to stab Klemmer. However, the decision she makes after seeing Klemmer is to turn the knife on herself.

Erika's decision reflects both the patriarchy's misogyny and women's powerlessness to resist it (Wilke, 1993, p. 135), and her final return home wounded to her mother's embrace suggests that she still can't escape her constraints. Combined with Erika's act of self-harm because she still can't blame others, everything returns to the starting point, and all issues remain unresolved. This ending thus declares the triumph of patriarchy and its hierarchical structures (Lücke, 2008, p. 75) and affirms that women have no place as subjects in a male-dominated society (Becker, 2021, p. 188), making this novel a tragedy about the failure of self-liberation.

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