

Internalized Oppression in Jacinta Kerketta's “Closed Doors”

Kanika Saini

Research Scholar, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur

Abstract

Women's oppression within patriarchy does not always remain visible through direct control, violence, or restrictions. Repeated exposure to patriarchal expectations can gradually shape women's psychological and emotional experiences as these experiences become internalized, influencing their sense of self, freedom, and self-worth. This process can be understood through the concept of internalized oppression. Jacinta Kerketta's "Closed Doors," published in her poetry collection *Angor* (2016), illustrates a woman living in a confined space where the physical restriction of the closed door is closely connected to her inner oppression. Her dreams remain outside, darkness enters her consciousness, and the door's small opening becomes a space through which she observes a world beyond her confinement. Drawing on feminist understandings of patriarchy and internalized oppression, this paper examines how the character's experience reflects oppression that extends beyond social restriction and becomes internalized within women's consciousness. Kerketta argues that the deepest form of patriarchal oppression is when a woman internalises her limitation so deeply that she begins to doubt even her freedom. This paper examines the representation of internalized oppression within patriarchy in the poem, with particular attention to the woman's restricted domestic space, suppressed desires, growing awareness, and eventual assertion of will.

Keywords: Oppression, Patriarchy, Gender, Internalized, Marginalization

Women's oppression within patriarchy is not always experienced through direct or visible forms of control. It can also become part of women's everyday lives through family expectations, social customs, gender roles, and ideas about how a woman should behave. From childhood, women are often taught to adjust, sacrifice, remain silent, and prioritize other needs. When such expectations are repeated over time, they become internalized, shaping women's consciousness and leading them to question their own worth, abilities, and choices. In this way, patriarchy does not remain only an external social structure. It can also affect women's personal and emotional experiences.

This is where the idea of internalized oppression becomes important. Suzanne Pharr explains that Internalized oppression involves "receiving the negative messages of society and internalizing them as self-hating, self-blaming, self-policing" (Pharr 33). When women live for a long time within unequal social conditions, the restrictions placed upon them may begin to affect their thoughts, desires, and expectations. They may start accepting certain limitations as normal because these limitations have been presented to them repeatedly as part of being a woman. Internalized oppression, therefore, can be understood as one of the ways in which patriarchal power continues to operate within the lives of women.

Suzanne Pharr further defines internalized oppression:

When the victim of oppression is led to believe the negative views of the oppressor, this phenomenon is called internal oppression. It takes the forms of self-hatred, which can express itself as depression, despair and self-abuse. And now, this view of internalized oppression highlights it as a state. It accepts the view that the dominant group results in the subservient groups developing emotions and feelings about themselves and a whole outlook of themselves which is based on the thinking of the dominant group. **(Pharr 60)**

Internalized oppression becomes important when oppression is no longer experienced only as something imposed by others but also begins to affect women's consciousness. Dr. E.J.R. David argues that "internalized oppression may be conceptualized as a set of self-defeating cognitions, attitudes, and behaviours that were developed as one consistently experiences an oppressive environment. Further, internalized oppression may be conceptualized as a distorted view of oneself and of others that is a consequence of how one experiences his or her environment." **(David 14)**

In a patriarchal society, women encounter ideas about obedience, sacrifice, dependence, modesty, and domestic responsibility so frequently that these ideas can become familiar parts of everyday life. A woman may therefore begin to measure her choices according to what is considered appropriate for her rather than according to what she personally wants. The restriction may not always need to be directly enforced because the social expectations surrounding her may already influence her decisions. In this way, patriarchy can continue to affect women even when there is no visible act of authority taking place. When a particular gender role is repeatedly presented as natural or necessary, questioning it can itself appear difficult. Women may learn to think that certain dreams are unrealistic, certain choices are unacceptable, or certain sacrifices are simply part of their responsibilities. Such responses do not mean that women are responsible for their oppression. Rather, they indicate how deeply social attitudes can shape individual consciousness. The power of patriarchy lies partly in its ability to make unequal arrangements appear ordinary, familiar, and difficult to challenge. Kate Millett writes:

The whole education of women ought to be relative to men. To please them, to be useful to them, to make themselves loved and honoured by them, to educate them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to make life sweet and agreeable to them- these are the duties of women at all times. And what should be taught to them from infancy. **(Millett 74)**

Within patriarchy, oppression can become part of women's everyday consciousness. A woman may learn that obedience is expected from her, that sacrifice is a virtue, or that certain desires are unsuitable for her. She may begin to regulate herself according to these expectations even when no one is directly forcing her at a particular moment. The external structure of patriarchy thus acquires an internal dimension.

Jacinta Kerketta's poetry provides a significant space for examining this relationship between external oppression and women's inner lives. Her poems bring attention to women whose lives are shaped by social and familial restrictions, while also giving importance to their thoughts, desires, suffering, and attempts to assert themselves. Writing from an Adivasi context, Kerketta frequently draws attention to women's lives, their struggles within family and society, and the different forms of control that affect their existence. Her women are not represented only through suffering. Their experiences also contain desire, observation, questioning, endurance, and resistance.

Kerketta was born in Khudposh village in West Singhbhum, Jharkhand, and belongs to the Oraon Adivasi community. She is a poet, writer, and journalist whose writing engages with Adivasi identity,

gender-based violence, displacement, and the social and political changes affecting Indigenous communities. Her first poetry collection, *Angor*, appeared in 2016, followed by *Jadon Ki Zameen* in 2018 and *Ishwar Aur Bazar* in 2022. Her later works include *Jacinta Ki Diary*, *Prem Mein Ped Hona*, and the 2026 story collection *Aurat Ka Ghar*.

The poem “Closed Doors” consequently presents internalized oppression as a process rather than a fixed psychological condition. Patriarchal restrictions shape women’s consciousness and self-perception, limiting their ability to think independently and make choices for themselves. When a woman is repeatedly told what she should do, how she should behave, and what limits she must accept, these restrictions can become internalized and influence her consciousness. When she repeatedly lives within boundaries that limit her freedom, choices, and movements, it begins to affect her thoughts and psychological well-being. Her poetry draws attention to women whose lives are shaped by social inequality, family expectations, violence, and gendered restrictions.

Jacinta Kerketta’s “Closed Doors” is a poem about a woman whose freedom and dreams are restricted by the world around her. Through the image of a closed door, cracks, darkness, light and the open sky, Kerketta writes about the condition of women who live within social boundaries but continue to hope for freedom. The poem begins with a woman who is physically separated from the world outside:

Through the cracks
In the closed doors
She peeks every day,
As her dreams
Slip through the gaps
And sprawled in the courtyard lay (**Kerketta 127**)

The closed door is the central symbol of the poem. It represents the restrictions imposed on a woman through patriarchy, family and social expectations. She can see the world through the cracks, but she cannot freely enter in it. The lines “Slip through the gaps / And sprawled in the courtyard lay” reflect that her dream exists, but they are not given enough space to grow.

However, the cracks in the door have another meaning. They allow light to enter. This shows that even within restricted circumstances, the woman has not completely lost hope. The light symbolises hope. Through the small cracks, she can see the outside world, and the light coming through these cracks create a hope within her. Kerketta writes:

At dawn when the sun
Comes knocking at the door,
The darkness suffocating inside
To escape through the holes writhes,
And through those chasms she sees
A piece of the open sky (**Kerketta 127**)

The poem then contrasts between the darkness inside with the darkness outside. The darkness within the room represents loneliness, fear and suppressed desires, while the darkness outside represents the wider social conditions that restrict women. Yet the coming of dawn changes this situation. The sunlight enters through the openings, suggesting the possibility of freedom, awareness and a new beginning:

A piece of the open sky
And the rays of the sun spread out to dry
In the courtyard

Like a bundle of paddy golden ripe. **(Kerketta 127)**

The image of the open sky is especially important. The woman cannot walk freely under that sky, but she can see it. Her ability to imagine something beyond the closed space becomes the beginning of resistance. Kerketta therefore shows that resistance does not always begin with a dramatic act. It sometimes begins with a dream, a question, or the desire to see beyond the boundaries imposed on a woman.

The final lines bring internalised oppression into focus. After living within restrictions for a long time, the woman has not only been physically confined but has also experienced their effect on her consciousness and will. When she finally breaks the door, she questions herself:

And she wonders -

Which of them was weaker,

The closed door or her volition? **(Kerketta 128)**

Through “Closed Doors,” Kerketta presents the restricted life of women imposed by patriarchal society. Her question reflects the uncertainty created by prolonged oppression. The restrictions have become so much a part of her experience that she begins to question whether the barrier was stronger than her own will. At the same time, breaking the door suggests that her desire for freedom has remained alive despite these internal effects. The closed door represents oppression, but its cracks represent possibility, hope and resistance. The poem ultimately suggests that even when women are confined by social boundaries, their dreams can still find a way to grow.

Patriarchy is not limited to the unequal distribution of power between men and women. It is also a social system that shapes ideas about gender, behaviour, responsibility, authority, and identity. Patriarchy is described by Walby as “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women” **(Walby 20)**. In a patriarchal society, men are generally given greater authority in family and social matters, while women are expected to adjust themselves according to established gender roles. These roles are often learned from childhood through family, cultural practices, social expectations, and everyday interactions.

Women may be taught to be obedient, caring, patient, self-sacrificing, and responsible for the needs of others, while qualities such as independence, assertiveness, and authority may be associated more strongly with men. Since these expectations are repeated across different areas of women’s lives, they can gradually appear natural rather than socially constructed. This makes patriarchy powerful not only because it controls women externally but also because it can influence how women understand themselves.

In the poem, a woman has learned to live within the boundaries created by patriarchy. Her confinement is not limited to the physical space of the home. Over time, these restrictions become internalized and shape how she perceives herself, her abilities, and her position in the society. She remains inside, observes what exists beyond her limited space, and experiences her possibilities mainly from a distance. This reflects internalised oppression, where a woman begins to accept the limits placed upon her and adjusts her desires and behaviour accordingly. She may recognise that there is a wider world outside, yet she does not easily imagine herself as someone who can freely enter and participate in it. In this way, patriarchy controls women not only through visible restrictions but also by shaping their sense of what is possible and acceptable for them. Thus, Internalized oppression can be understood as the process through which the negative attitudes, assumptions, and restrictions associated with an oppressive social system become part of the consciousness of those who experience that system.

Within a patriarchy social structure, internalization can begin through the repeated learning of gender roles. A girl may grow up by observing women being expected to perform the domestic responsibilities while men are associated with positions of authority. She learns that a woman is expected to compromise her own needs and choices for the sake of her family. When such ideas are encountered repeatedly, they can become part of a woman's consciousness. She begins to shape her behaviour according to these expectations without questioning their origin. Thus, the social rule becomes a form of internalized oppression.

Patriarchal expectations are presented as virtues. Obedience is described as respect, silence as maturity, sacrifice as love, and adjustment as a woman's responsibility. When restrictions are expressed through positive moral language, it becomes more difficult to recognise them as forms of control. A woman who constantly sacrifices herself for others is often accepted and praised, while a woman who prioritises herself may be criticised as selfish. She begins to judge herself according to the same standards through which society judges her.

In the poem, when the woman breaks the door and steps outside, instead of questioning the boundary that confines her, she begins to judge herself. This reflects internalised oppression, where patriarchal restrictions become so deeply rooted that a woman may blame herself even when she attempts to free herself from them. The development of self-doubt is one of the significant effects of internalized oppression. Internalized oppression also affects the emotional life of the oppressed. In the poem, even when the woman becomes free, she begins to question herself. Her hesitation shows how deeply patriarchal expectations have shaped her sense of freedom and self-worth.

Patriarchal socialisation teaches women to place the needs of the family before their individual needs. Marriage, motherhood, domestic responsibilities, and care may become central to the definition of respectable "womanhood". There is nothing inherently negative about these roles, but problems arise when they are treated as compulsory. A woman may have professional ambitions, interests, personal goals, or a desire for independence, yet she may feel that pursuing these things makes her less devoted to her family. The conflict between personal desire and social expectation can lead women to suppress their own needs.

In the poem, the woman has her own dreams and desires, but she cannot fully pursue them. The restrictions placed upon her prevent her from moving beyond the limited life expected of her. Her unfulfilled dreams reflect how patriarchal expectations can lead women to suppress their own dreams. All these restrictions affect her ability to think about herself. Her mind is so shaped by social expectations that even when she wants to follow her dreams, she questions whether she should. In this way, patriarchal oppression becomes internalized and limits her ability to think and choose freely. She becomes conscious of what society will approve or reject and adjusts her behaviour accordingly. Her choices are shaped only by social expectation.

Patriarchal expectations of femininity are associated with patience, softness, and emotional control. Women who openly express anger are considered unfeminine. As a result, women may learn to suppress anger even when they experience injustice. They may remain silent to avoid conflict, apologise even when they have not done anything wrong. In the poem, she remains confined within these expectations. This internalised oppression controls her own feelings, limiting her ability to express herself.

Her silences also lead to self-blame because women are often made to feel responsible for meeting multiple expectations at the same time. They may be expected to be successful in their work while remaining fully responsible for domestic duties and family relationships. When these demands cannot all

be fulfilled, women may blame themselves rather than questioning the unequal distribution of responsibility. Patriarchy can therefore make structural inequality appear like an individual failure, instead of asking why women are expected to carry multiple responsibilities, a woman asks herself why she is unable to manage everything.

Internalized oppression is deeply intertwined with the construction of women's identities, shaping their self-perception and constraining their capacity to articulate their thoughts, desires, and sense of self. Identity develops through interaction with family, community, culture, and society. When women repeatedly receive the ideology that their primary value lies in their relationships with others, their individual identity may become secondary to these roles. They may begin to define themselves primarily as someone's daughter, wife, and mother rather than as an individual with independent desires and ambitions. When society provides women with limited space to define themselves, their understanding of their own individuality can become constrained.

Internalized oppression ultimately demonstrates that patriarchy operates at both the social and personal levels. It can also shape the consciousness of those who live within its structure. In the poem, the woman learns to control her behaviour, reduce her expectations, suppress her desires, and judge herself according to patriarchal standards.

Internalized oppression also demonstrates why changes in laws and institutions are important. Social equality requires changes not only in formal structures but also in the attitudes and expectations through which gender relations are maintained in everyday life. Women need social conditions in which their voices, choices, ambitions, and identities are treated as legitimate.

Thus Kerketta's poetry reveals profound impact of patriarchy on women's lives. Patriarchal control can shape women's lives through external restrictions, but its influence can become more enduring when those restrictions affect women's consciousness. Self-doubt, silence, guilt, restricted expectations, suppression of desire, and difficulty in asserting oneself may develop within social environments that repeatedly privilege male authority and define acceptable womanhood in narrow terms. These effects should not be treated as individual weaknesses. They need to be understood in relation to the social structures and gender expectations that produce them.

Conclusion

The poem "Closed Doors" reveals how repeated patriarchal restriction can become internalized within women's consciousness. It can move from external control to internalized oppression. She suppresses her dreams and desires and begins to give greater importance to social expectation than to her own needs. In the end of the poem, when the woman breaks the door and step outside, instead of questioning the boundaries that confines her, she begins to judge herself. It show how deeply patriarchal oppression has been internalized within her. Ultimately, "Closed Doors" shows that the strongest form of oppression is not always the door that keeps a woman inside, but the doubt that remains within her even after the door is broken. Kerketta's poem therefore draws attention to the lasting psychological effects of patriarchy and the difficulty of reclaiming one's freedom after years of restriction. Thus, "Closed Doors" presents internalized oppression as a psychological consequence of living under continued patriarchal expectations.

Works Cited

1. David, Edward. J. R., editor. *Internalized Oppression: The Psychology of Marginalized Groups*.

Springer Publishing Company, 2014.

2. Kerketta, Jacinta. *Angor*. Anuugya Books, 2016.
3. Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. Doubleday, 1970.
4. Pharr, Suzanne. *In the Time of the Right: Reflections on Liberation*. Chardon Press, 1996.
5. Walby, Sylvia. *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Basil Blackwell, 1990.