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**INCARCERATED, NOT DEFEATED: A STUDY OF POWER OF QUIET  
RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE IN THE MOVIE *GIRL IN THE  
BASEMENT* (2021)**

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**Abstract**

*The paper investigates female resistance in the film *Girl in the Basement*, predominantly focusing on the protagonist, Sara, and her defiance against patriarchal abuse, and her confinement. By employing Johan Galtung's Violence Triangle as a critical framework, the study examines how Sara endures direct, structural, and cultural violence. While the film presents harrowing depiction of violence, the study argues that Sara's most powerful resistance is rooted in her motherhood. Sara reclaims her agency not just by managing an escape, but significantly by nurturing her children, educating them, and instilling a sense of self and agency in them. Motherhood becomes a mode of defiance that counters the dehumanization forced upon her. The analysis reveals that Sara's endurance of psychological assault, positive nurturing of children and refusal to surrender are profound acts of defiance within a deeply violent structure of the society. Through analysis, the study reframes the narrative not as one of victimhood, but a testament to strength and subtle resistance of a woman, stripped of her agency.*

**Introduction**

Societal and cultural narratives impose roles and identities upon individuals which profoundly pave the way for systematic oppression. This is significantly what Simone de Beauvoir implies when he says, "One is not born a woman, but becomes one". One of the ways to oppression is abuse; physical, sexual or psychological. Abuse ensures maintenance of male hegemony and control over the women. It strips women of their identity and agency, persuading them to internalize the helplessness, distorted sense of self-worth as a human being, the sense of being responsible of their own suffering, and their erasure in general. There are certain tools of hegemony: patriarchy, religion, economy etc. These tools are exploited in order to stifle the voices of women. Most of the time, women are subjugated owing to their considered inferior position in the society. The monopoly of men in a society deprived of providing basic necessities of life to women is deep-seated through different means. These means come forth in plethora of ways: they may be an incessant reminder of breadwinning capabilities or status of provider of the family, physical dominance, physical superiority, or any other form where men impose themselves as superior to women.

In the context of systemic oppression, resistance and resilience provides us a framework for understanding how people survive and confront such treatment at the hands of abusers. Resistance can be loud, visible and can be quiet and internal too. However, resilience implies how one adapts, recovers and endures the harm, without being emotionally damaged with it. Generally, resilience of trauma survivors is manifested through small yet significant everyday practices, which includes maintaining sanity, holding on to identity, being optimistic and at times just managing to live. Resistance and resilience are fundamentally intertwined. In the case of trauma survivors, resilience

is in itself resistance to the will and demand of the oppressor, whose major aim predominantly is to be inculcate shame, despair and fear in the mind of the oppressed.

Film is a mass communication medium used to depict social life and cultural lessons, forming audiences' views with the content of the message, based on the assumption that films project societal realities onto the screen (*View of the Representation of Women's Resistance in the Film "Perempuan Tanah Jahanam"*). Unequivocally, film, being one of the most influential modes of mass communication, transcends entertainment. It significantly functions as a cultural artefact which reflects, presents, molds, critiques the social values of the society. In the 21<sup>st</sup> C, film has become an influential platform for highlighting sensitive issues, including domestic abuse, mental health, marital rape, psychological abuse, patriarchy and social hierarchy, which for the major part of history were systematically censored from the discourse. Filmmakers, by projecting such narratives on the screen, attempt to voice the silenced ones, suffering as a result of systemic oppression. Films allow the audience to hear, see, feel and experience the nuances of trauma, resistance and resilience which academic texts, reports or newspapers fail to present.

*Girl in the Basement*, based on a real-life dreadful event, narrates the story of a girl named Sara, a teenager, who is held captive by her father, for having dreams which he doesn't approve of. Her father subjects her to relentless physical, sexual and psychological abuse in the basement of her own house. He pushes Sara's existence to be defined by confinement and control, yet a powerful resistance is displayed by Sara, who not only endures the abuse herself, but saves her children from the potential abuse from her father. Sara protects and ultimately reclaims her agency, her sense of self as a mother and a human being, who has all the right to breathe freely as anyone else in the society. The paper explores the quiet defiance of character of Sara which is manifested through her endurance, and mental and maternal strength. The movie, *Girl in the Basement* doesn't merely portray the horror of such brutal violence and incest, but profoundly highlights the resilience of a woman who refuses to be dictated and broken easily, preserving her own identity in face of it.

The researcher focuses solely on the resistance displayed by the character of Sara in the movie. The researcher doesn't attempt to conduct a psychoanalysis of the oppressor or to examine the psychological abuse subjected at the other members of family, thus delimiting the topic. Moreover, the researcher narrowed her research by focusing only on one literary piece, and doesn't attempt to compare the particular chosen one with any other literary text or the real-life cases of captivity.

### **Research Questions**

- In what way does Sara demonstrate resistance against her father's abuse?
- In what ways does motherhood become a catalyst for empowerment and resistance for Sara during her captivity?

### **Thesis Statement**

The movie, *Girl in the Basement* (2021), presents how patriarchal norms strip women of their agency, but Sara through her quiet defiance and resilience reclaims her sense of self and agency in face of physical, sexual and mental abuse. Deploying the lens of John Galtung's violence triangle, which categorizes systematic oppression into direct, structural and cultural violence, the study argues that Sara's resistance is not just an act of endurance, rather a powerful presentation of quiet resistance. The paper explores how Sara resists each form of violence in different ways. The paper deduces that Sara's resistance to the abuse subjected by her father is embodied not only through



the escape that she manages but also through her psychological endurance and maternal strength. Moreover, the paper examines how Sara challenges conventional depiction of heroism and victimhood.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The council of Europe regards violence against women as a form of gender-based violence. It defines it as:

“Violence against women” is understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life [*Council of Europe*, art. 3].)

Galtung explains patriarchy as “an institutionalization of male dominance in vertical structures”, highly correlating with gender and position, “legitimized by culture (e.g. in religion and language), and often emerging as direct violence with males as subjects and females as objects (40).

He further explicates how patriarchy paves a way for violence. He says:

Patriarchy [...] combines direct, structural, and cultural violence in a vicious triangle. They reinforce each other in cycles starting from any corner. Direct violence, such as rape, intimidates and represses; structural violence institutionalizes; and cultural violence internalizes that relation, especially for the victims, the women, making structure very durable (Galtung 40).

On individual level, abusive behavior supports the maintenance of hegemony of male power and control over women. Moreover, structural abuse threatens women’s agency and ability to work or simply escape the dependency of women for resources on men, which significantly increases the probability of women staying in abusive and violent relationships.

A woman living in or leaving a violent relationship generates self-doubt, which is frequently reinforced by family members, friends and institutions, often leading one to self-blame and self-harm at times too. Another factor that contributes to is that male perpetrators are often better accepted and excused for their responsibility than female victim (Barnett and LaViolette 77). Third Wave of feminism and so many other theorists remarkably talk about the resistance of women against their suppression, objectification and marginalization. Wade defines resistance as:

Any mental or behavioral act through which a person attempts to expose, withstand, repel, stop, prevent, abstain from, strive against, impede, refuse to comply with, or oppose any form of violence or oppression (including any type of disrespect), or the conditions that make such acts possible, may be understood as a form of resistance (23).

Geiger argues that women significantly are presented as helpless and passive victims in Literature. It is one of the major reasons that women’s resistance to violence is often overlooked because it does not fit generally into gendered vulnerability (Hollander and Geiger).

Campbell et al majorly presented their view that women subjected to abuse actively use strategies of resistance to resistance to make their relationship safe for themselves and significantly for their children. Research with abused women found that women commonly developed strategies to prevent or reduce violence by calculating how best to diffuse a potentially violent situation. These women used calculated responses deduced from knowledge and experience in their relationship,

to prevent violence (Cavanagh). For instance, one of the women agreed for sexual intimacy to ensure his pleasant mood to not get him violent against herself. However, other women in the study significantly employed the technique of direct retaliation, including verbal and physical, suggesting others to walk out of relationships as well (Cavanagh).

Film is one of the genres of literature and is based on real life events or imagination. Films are highly regarded genre as it is audio visual medium and knowledge can be consumed more through this (Khalik 153). In terms of content, films are action, drama, comedy, adventure, musical, war, pop, horror and fantasy films. Meanwhile, in terms of production orientation, they are commercial and non-commercial films (Tamburaka 113).

A lot of research work has already been done on different films which explores violence subjected towards women and highlights their resistance. “Violence against Women and Resistance in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Zero Point* and Alberto Moravia's *The Woman of Rome*” reveals violence against women. It employs Foucault's theory of power relation. The character of Firdous in the text, *Woman at point zero*, experiences violence not only from her family members, but from society too. She faces psychological, sexual and economic violence. She resists violence by parting ways with her husband and all the other people who try to take advantage of her and ends up killing one. On the other hand, the character of Adriana in the *Woman of Rome* shows her resistance through passive actions (Hidayati et al.).

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The following study is conducted using Johan Galtung's Violence Triangle (1969) which distinguishes between three types of violence: direct, structural, and cultural. The framework is majorly used to study violence carried out against women. Additionally, it is one of the concepts that are commonly used in research on patriarchal oppression. There are various forms of direct violence. In its most traditional form, it entails the use of physical force, including rape, sexual violence, torture, and murder. Along with direct violence, Galtung highlights structural violence, which is a type of violence that is concealed within larger or smaller structures rather than being committed by individuals. Additionally, according to Galtung, cultural violence is the result of prevalent attitudes and beliefs that have been taught about power and violence in everyday society since childhood. Galtung's violence triangle is conceptually related to and influenced by one another. Direct violence is a result of both structural and cultural violence. In addition to that, structural and cultural violence are intensified or made worse by the direct violence; because, its roots are in structure and culture. The direct violence, whether it is verbal or physical, is manifested as a behavior that never changes (Galtung, 1969).

### **ANALYSIS**

The film, *Girl in the Basement*, directed by Elisabeth Röhm, is an emotionally distressful yet an inspiring account of a girl Sara, who resists prolonged abuse through her quiet defiance and resilience. Sara is held captive in the basement of her own house, just because she dreams of a better life, in companionship of a partner of her own choice. When she dreams to live away from the control of her narcissistic father, to explore the world of God, her winged are cut brutally and she is assaulted in all the different manners, denying her right to liberty and choice.

Johan Galtung's Violence Triangle distinguishes between direct, structural and cultural violence, which are interconnected forms of violence. The model is one of the most suitable methods to



explore the violence subjected by Sara's father in the movie, *Girl in the Basement*, in which the violence is not simply physical but systematic, based on societal systematic violent pattern.

Galtung's concept of direct violence implies physical harm, acts that cause bodily and ultimately psychological harm. Sara endures direct violence, through physical beating, sexual assaults and constant surveillance by her father. The overall abuse is profoundly inflicted upon to make her subservient, obedient, to push her to return well to the investment made in the seventeen years of her life by her biological father by dominating her body to cause the erasure of her identity and agency. The brutality inflicted on her is ruthless, yet the film focuses on the emotionally stable, which is unexpected of a trauma survivor, making the film a spectacle. The striking scene right in the beginning of captivity, where she is subjected to sexual assault as a punishment to her resistance, sets the tone for a regime of physical control (*Girl in the Basement* 00:08:20). The narrative is loaded with instances where Sara is subjected to physical assault whenever she displays resistance. At one horrifying instance, Don, father of Sara and the father of Sara's children, beats Sara to pulp, causing her a dreadful miscarriage of her fourth child as a result of rape, when Sara tries to signal for help through a leakage hole through a torch (*Girl in the Basement*, 01:00:42). Sara, rather than giving up to assault, and being entirely broken, she practices silence resistance by holding on to her memories, holding on to the will to live, and by being optimistic that freedom is possible. On Don's repeated reminders that the world has forgotten her, she refuses to fall for the manipulation. She doesn't fight him directly but she doesn't yield either. Sara's major resilience lies in her silence, her refusal to surrender her to the oppressor. The refusal to submission of her identity even after abiding by the orders and demands of the oppressor denies the oppressor complete domination.

Structural violence is the one in which social structure and institutions create inequalities in which some groups are hindered from equal access to opportunities on purpose (Galtung 170). The kind of violence is built in the very architecture, the basement set in the house, which even the wife of Don has never seen or talked about. It also covers the relationships that surround Sara. Sara is in literal, not metaphorically, removed from society and imprisoned in the basement of the same house, where she lived her seventeen years of her life. It is evident by the fact that for nearly two decades, she is denied basic rights, freedom to movement, education, medical care, even at the time of childbirths and her miscarriage. Sara's long captivity mirrors structural violence. The father's role as domestic patriarch as well as the captor reflects dreadfully the worst kind of male domination. Sara's captivity becomes a metaphor of patriarchal control. Her captivity by her own biological father isn't merely a personal betrayal but larger structure of male hegemony, a feeling of entitlement of ownership of women's bodies.

However, Sara resists the structure by attempting whatever she can. Sara reclaims the space, the basement which was set up to strip her identity and snatch her identity, majorly when she transforms it into a classroom for her children, an adventure zone for her children to not let them understand the oppression in their early childhood which could have distorted their view of world at a young age (*Girl in the Basement* 00:45:20). Despite being a victim of incestuous rape, she chooses to nurture and teach her children. She reclaims a sense of authority in the space which was designed to oppress her. She creates a moral space for herself and children, within an immoral one. Furthermore, her act of teaching her children to read, to introduce the free world to children, instilling a sense of identity is symbolic of intellectual resistance to the oppression. Don seeks to



isolate and control, to instill a sense of fear and dominance in the captives, however, Sara fosters a sense of identity, awareness and growth in children.

Galtung describes cultural violence as the normalization of abuse through beliefs and ideologies that justify it (Galtung 292). Cultural violence refers to social norms and ideologies, which tend to justify and legitimize structural and direct violence. Don's insistence on the fact that the members of his family, 'belong' to him, and his ability to conceal his abuse for decades, are significantly the product of culture that fails women, by not paying heed to their misery and despair, especially within the domestic sphere. Sara's father flagrantly tries to justify the abuse, subjugation by twisted notion of control, parenting and authority at many instances. Furthermore, at multiple instances, he tries to gaslight Sara and her sisters, deeming it as "protection", repeatedly telling them that they are immature, naïve and unprepared for the cruel and brutal world. Sara's refusal to internalize this ideology becomes an act of resilience against cultural oppression. Sara never falls for Don's narrative about her worth and his idea that the world has forgotten her and would never be accepting even if she manages to escape. She retains and maintains her sense of self, her identity, which is quite evident by her little gestures, for instance, giving her children loving names, regarding them as blessings, telling them stories and telling them stories of her life before captivity in a twisted manner. Sara doesn't let cultural ideologies get to her head and she treats her children, which are a result of incestuous rape pregnancies, as catalysts to her powerful and resilient rejection of her captivity.

Sara's journey into motherhood, forced upon her by sexual assaults, becomes fundamental source of her empowerment and resilience. Sara treats her children as a mean to reclaim the lost power in the most powerless of situations, rather than letting them to be an extension of her trauma. She teaches them, nurtures them with compassion and kindness, saving from the captive's brutality, designed to strip identities and oppression. When Sara gives birth to her first girl in the basement alone, without any medical aid, her maternal instincts overshadow her trauma. Rather than choosing to hate her and deem her as a product of the assault that she was subjected to, she considers her as a gift and a blessing that was sent to her to cut down her isolation and loneliness. Motherhood gives Sara a purpose beyond endurance, it becomes an anchor for her quiet rebellion. At one instance, she says to her daughter that "The world is bigger than this room," thus instilling hope of freedom, to witness the outside world, not just in her children but for herself too. Moreover, she arranges adventure, makes up stories and then urges Don to bring them a television, to maintain a direct link with the outside world, with a hope that one day her children would breathe in the same fresh air that they would experience on the television.

Moreover, by choosing to nurture rather than disowning them, Sara transforms the role posed on her as a catalyst for her act of resistance. She teaches her children to read, think and hope, preserving their sense of identity and urging them to maintain their agency as a human being. Sara, through her quiet defiance and thoughtful strategies even convinces Don to take one of the kids upstairs to her biological mother, ensuring one of the kid's better lives. This profoundly expresses that even year-long captivity fails to strip her of her agency and power to control the circumstances around her (*Girl in the Basement* 00:48:35). The role allows her to assert control in microcosm of the basement, and she produces a world, full of care, affection, empathy and optimism, a powerful depiction of resilience against repression of an innocent girl, for having dream of a prosperous happy life, carried out by systematic oppression of patriarch culture.



## CONCLUSION

Girl in the basement, unequivocally, is an appalling exploration of patriarchal violence, but it's also a narrative that displays invincible resistance. The study concludes that the literary piece is not merely a harrowing depiction of violence, rather it's a deeply rooted exploration of resistance, resilience and survival. Through Johan Galtung's Violence triangle, the researcher deduces that Sara is not only assaulted physically but by structural confinement, taking an edge from cultural ideology. The analysis explicates us different dimensions of violence, including, direct, structural and cultural that Sara ensures. Despite all, the resistance of character of Sara stands firm throughout the narrative through quiet defiance; silent at first, then, maternal which is predominantly protective for her children. The resilience grows stronger by every child, produced out of the sexual assaults, by the inherent love for her children. Sara's story defies conventional norms and portrayals of rebellion. Moreover, it's deduced that Sara defies conventional portrayal of heroism and victimhood. She employs strategy of quiet resilience, firm resistance, rather than direct resistance, by nurturing her children, maintaining her sense of self and identity. The presence of her children unequivocally acts as a catalyst for her unwavering resilience, refusing to submit. Thus, the study suggests that resistance is not always loud and visible, it can exist in quiet strategies and choices too. By employing Galtung's triangle, the paper propounds that violence is complex and multi-layered, and so is resistance and resilience.

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