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**Research Article**

**A Socialist-Feminist Discussion on Women's Oppression: Circus Valentine as a Case Study<sup>a</sup>**

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**Abstract**

**Introduction:** Feminism focuses on the subordination of women within patriarchal societies. Socialist-feminism links women's oppression to historical, social, and psychological factors. It states that a radical change is needed for liberation, which should begin with overthrowing capitalism. This study analyzes *Circus Valentine* by Norman from a socialist-feminist view. The play discusses that the suffering of women is connected to capitalism and patriarchy.

**Method:** This study employs socialist-feminism to examine *Circus Valentine*. The methodology combines textual analysis with socio-historical contextualization. Key characters, dialogues, and plot are examined to uncover how gender, class, and ethnic identities intersect with systemic oppression. Historical documents, feminism, and Marxism provide a framework to interpret social dynamics within the play. Particular attention is given to patterns of labor, authority, and family structures, as well as the ways capitalist and patriarchal systems shape individual and collective experiences. The analysis is conducted by mapping textual elements onto theoretical constructs, allowing for a nuanced understanding of oppression in fictional and broader socio-economic context.

**Results or Findings:** In *Circus Valentine*, victimization of women is rooted in history, culture, and society. Since women's experiences reflect the struggles of workers, minority and ethnic groups, they remain controlled by capitalism and patriarchy.

**Discussion or Conclusion:** *Circus Valentine* highlights the oppression faced both by women and by certain social classes and groups. Capitalism cannot be eliminated by women alone. To challenge capitalism, a movement involving all oppressed groups is necessary. The solution for the suffering of people lies in creating a classless society.

*Keywords:* socialist-feminism, capitalism, patriarchal system, class conflicts, ethnicity

*JEL Codes:* J81, Z13, I3

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Araştırma Makalesi

**Kadınların Baskılanması Üzerine Sosyalist-Feminist Bir Çalışma: Vaka Çalışması  
Olarak Valentine Sirki<sup>a</sup>**

**Yasemin Güniz Sertel<sup>b</sup>**

**Öz**

**Giriş:** Feminizm kadınların ataerkil toplumlarda nasıl ikincil konumda tutulduğuna odaklanır. Sosyalist-feminizm kadınların baskılanmasını tarihsel, toplumsal, biyolojik ve psikolojik etkenlerle ilişkilendirir. Ayrıca kadınların özgürleşmesi için radikal bir değişim gerektiğini, bunun da kapitalizmin yıkılmasıyla başlaması gerektiğini savunur. Bu çalışma, Amerikalı oyun yazarı Marsha Norman'ın *Circus Valentine* adlı oyununu sosyalist-feminist bir bakış açısıyla inceler. Oyun, kadınların yaşadığı acıların hem kapitalizmle hem de ataerkil sistemle bağlantılı olduğunu ortaya koyar.

**Yöntem:** Bu çalışma, Marsha Norman'ın Valentine Sirki adlı oyununu sosyalist-feminist kuram çerçevesinde inceler. Çalışmanın metodolojik yaklaşımı, metin analizini sosyo-kültürel ve tarihsel bakış açılarıyla bağlamsallaştırır. Cinsiyet, sınıfsal, etnik kimliklerin sistematik baskılanması oyundaki ana karakterler, diyaloglar ve olay örgüsü örneklenerek açıklanır. Oyundaki sosyal dinamikler, tarihi olaylar, feminist kuram ve Marksist bakış açısı çerçevesinde yorumlanır. Kapitalist ve ataerkil sistemin bireyleri ve kolektif deneyimi nasıl şekillendirdiği anlatılırken, işçi-işveren ilişkisi, otorite ve aile yapısı özellikle vurgulanır. Yapılan analiz, bu metinsel unsurların teorik yapılarla eşlenmesiyle yürütülür ve bu sayede hem kurgusal hem de daha geniş sosyo-ekonomik bağlamda baskının daha ayrıntılı bir şekilde anlaşılmasına olanak tanır.

**Sonuçlar ya da Bulgular:** *Circus Valentine* oyununda kadınların mağduriyetinin kökeni Amerikan toplumunun tarihine, kültürüne ve sosyal kurallarına dayanır. Bu kadınlar işçi sınıfının, azınlıkların ve etnik grupların mücadelesini yansıttığı sürece, kapitalist ve ataerkil kurumlar tarafından denetim altında tutulurlar.

**Tartışma ya da Yapılan Çıkarımlar:** Oyun yalnızca kadınların değil, belirli sınıf ve grupların da maruz kaldığı baskıyı gösterir. Kapitalizm yalnızca kadınlar tarafından yıkılamaz; bu sistemin değişmesi için işçilerin ve ezilen tüm grupların katıldığı daha geniş çaplı bir hareket gerekir. Kalıcı çözüm, sınıfsız bir toplum yaratmaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** sosyalist-feminizm, kapitalizm, ataerkil sistem, sınıfsal fark, etnik köken

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## Introduction

The feminist movement generally focuses on how women are often placed in subordinate and victimized roles within patriarchal society. The women's movement of the 1960s helped women openly discuss their issues more widely and it became clear that women's challenges did not come from their inability to adapt to life but from the way society's basic structures are constructed. This understanding led to the recognition that women's problems require major social changes. While many debates exist about the causes of women's oppression, it is not enough to discuss this problem only from a historical perspective. Social, biological, and psychological factors also play important roles in keeping women subordinate. Women's independent position in society is affected by these factors, but improving and transforming their situation also depends on changing the core institutions of society. To do this, it is essential to analyze how women relate to social institutions and what influences their status.

### A Socialist- Feminist Discussion of *Circus Valentine*

Feminist American playwright Marsha Norman's play *Circus Valentine* centers on the challenges faced by a group of people working in a circus. These circus members struggle to keep their failing company afloat while also trying to maintain their dignity and human values. The story of the play mainly focuses on Fred and Goldie Valentine, who are circus people of Russian origin and who with their 19 year old trapeze daughter Trina, have been serving the circus for a long time. Fred is the manager and ringmaster, and he handles all the shows. Goldie used to be a trapeze artist before she married Fred. Now, she works as a fortune-teller and a cook for the circus. Goldie's sister, Eva, is also involved in the circus as an aerialist. The circus also includes the Siamese twins, Brad and Bill Evans, who are part of the workforce. Fred is an emotional man who cannot stand the strange appearance and unusual lifestyle of the twins. He secretly spends all the circus' money to try to split them up with an operation. His plans include sending them away to a different town, hoping to have a new beginning for them.

Although this study aims to explore the oppression of women from a socialist-feminist point of view in Marsha Norman's play *Circus Valentine*, it is also important to recognize that the play features oppressed individuals of all classes and genders. In *Circus Valentine*, women's suffering interlinks not only with their gender but also with the difficulties they face within their working-class community and the mistreatment of ethnic and minority groups, echoing the principles of intersectionality. At first glance, the main theme seems to focus on the suffering of working-class people under the rules of a harsh capitalist system.

According to Marxist theory, women's oppression is seen as a secondary issue. It is viewed as a result of a deeper form of oppression—one tied to their class. Marxism argues that women are not oppressed by patriarchy alone but by the capitalist system that keeps society divided. This system causes suffering beyond just women, affecting all classes as well. In the play *Circus Valentine*, there are clear social divisions. The circus workers symbolize the working class, while Reeves, who owns the shopping center where the circus is set up, stands for the capitalist oppressor. He benefits from the system by exploiting the working class and keeping them oppressed. At this point, studying Marxist ideas will help us understand how capitalism works and what its rules are. Such analysis proves that the working class is made to suffer under the capitalist system.

## Capitalism as a System and the Discussion of Marxism

Capitalism can be seen as an unfair social and economic system, where class discrimination exists. Workers often find themselves fighting against a system that creates poverty even when wealth is abundant. In such societies, work can become alienating, especially with advances in technology. Racism and sexism also play a role in dividing workers and maintaining inequality. Marxism critiques multiple aspects of capitalist societies, discussing the development of class society, the processes of wealth accumulation, the reproduction of class dominance, and the evolution of contradictions and class struggle (Felski, 1989). Aspects of this critique will be examined throughout this paper in connection with the play *Circus Valentine*.

Traditional Marxism sees the endless conflicts between economic classes as the key to understanding modern capitalist society and how social change occurs. In these societies, there are clear class divisions, and equal chances do not exist for everyone. The working class creates wealth through their labor, but the profits and power stay with the ruling class and employers.

In *Circus Valentine*, Reeves stands for the ruling class. He is described as a busy but sweaty and successful businessman who owns the shopping center where the circus is held. Reeves in his identity depicts the differences between the rich and the workers. He perceives himself as beneficial to society by managing operations while viewing the workers simply as those enjoying their roles. He says, "People like me keep the world going while people like you act like you're doing us a favor by enjoying yourselves in it. You'd starve without us" (Norman, 1998, p.150).

Marxism defines a class in two main ways: "by the role it plays in the processes of production and by the stake it has in the ownership of property" (Reed, 1984, p.134). Thus, it emphasizes both the role it plays in making things and that who owns property. Throughout the play, Reeves and the ruling class own the means to produce goods. This makes them controlling power of the economy because they provide jobs to the working class. The workers, however, only own their ability to work. They have to sell their labor to survive. The difference between Reeves' life and that of the workers highlights what Friedrich Engels calls "class antagonism." Engels explains that this conflict grows with the development of labor and the rise of private property and wealth. As productivity increases, new forms of wealth and exchange emerge, fueling class struggles (Engles, 1982).

Throughout the play, it is possible to observe this antagonism/ tension in the relationships between different social classes. Reeves shows his hostility toward workers by belittling them and calling them gypsies. He implies they are inferior to him, both as a minority and in attitude. For example, he asks, "You gypsies, you think you're too good to talk to me?" (Norman, 1998, p.125). The workers, like Goldie, show their reaction through feelings of resentment. She tells Reeves, "Mister, the only thing you have in this world is money" (Norman, 1998, p.150). Overall, class conflict shows up in the play as hatred from the workers toward their bosses and oppression from the ruling class. The workers feel anger and disrespect, while the bosses maintain control through their power and wealth.

In capitalist societies, the ruling class of capitalists focuses on making money. They control many parts of daily life, such as work conditions and living standards. Marx talks about this situation as the "reproduction of labor." He explains that the needs of workers are based on both their biological needs and the environment they live in. He says that what workers need and how they meet those needs depend on the habits, comfort, and conditions of

their social class (Marx, 1972). For example, when Leroy works at the circus, he is given money, food, and a place to sleep. These are meant to meet his basic needs, or what Marx calls “necessary wants,” so he can keep working. This setup helps reproduce labor and benefits his boss, Reeves, who is driven by profit. Reeves admits he owns the mall only to make money and cares little about anything else. Reeves’s focus on making money comes from capitalism’s goal to turn everything—goods, labor, and money—into profit. Gayle Rubin describes capitalism as “a set of social relations – forms of property, and so forth – in which production takes the form of turning money, things and people into capital” (Rubin in Nicholson, 1997, p. 29). Therefore, capitalism becomes a system where property, money, and people are used to create more capital. Reeves’s view of workers fits this description well, since his main aim is to increase his wealth through their labor.

In this system, money becomes the main asset. When it’s exchanged for labor, it helps reproduce and grow the capital. It does so by taking value from workers, their work, and the goods they produce. Reeves’s obsession with keeping this cycle going shows he is a typical capitalist boss who holds power over his workers. Nancy Hartsock refers to such power as “the ability to compel obedience, or as control and domination” (Hartsock, 1984, p. 272). In other words, it becomes the ability to force obedience or control others. In *Circus Valentine*, Reeves uses his power to increase the suffering of his workers. He threatens to fire them if they do anything he dislikes. For example, he warns a worker that their work lines will be cut if they try to resist or speak out. His attitude shows he seeks to dominate his workers and keep them weak. Hartsock defines this situation as the “power domination of others” and describes this as the way some bosses use power to diminish others and restrict their progress (Hartsock, 1984, p. 272).

### **Work and Power Relationship in a Patriarchal Capitalist Society**

In a patriarchal capitalist society, the way work and power are organized shows how different groups depend on and dominate each other. These workplace relations reflect broader social patterns of control and influence. Power in society shapes how people relate and interact. The core values of such a society, including competition, reason, and control, also impact social relationships. Heidi I. Hartman describes this social power by linking it to class inequality and the capitalist system: “In a Marxist-feminist view, the organization of production ... is shaped by patriarchy and capitalism. Our present social structure rests upon unequal division of labor by class and by gender which generates tension, conflict and change. These underlying patriarchal and capitalist relations among people are the sources of dynamism in our society” (Hartman, 1984). Hence, in discussing the organization of production, Hartman underscores the significance of patriarchy and capitalism. Given that the current societal framework is predicated on uneven distributions of labor according to class and gender, these disparities perpetuate tension, conflict, and continuous transformation. The underlying patriarchal and capitalist relationships among people drive societal progression.

In *Circus Valentine*, the idea of work is understood through social relationships and structures influenced by capitalism. The boss, Reeves, predominantly views work as a means to generate profit, a perspective that leads to the exploitation and control of laborers. His own existence is tied to this process, as he states, “My money is dead so am I” (Norman, 1998, p.150). Meanwhile, the workers in the circus hold different values and approach to work in a different light. This difference reflects the way society is organized under capitalism and patriarchal systems. Hartsock describes this as a division between mental and manual labor. She explains that this split reflects the power imbalance between those in control and those who are controlled. Usually, those in power do mental work, making decisions and giving

orders. On the other hand, workers do manual tasks that require physical effort (Hartsock, 1984). For example while Reeves uses his money to do mental work—directing others and making plans, the circus workers perform manual work with their physical strength and labor. In *Circus Valentine* Reeves refers to this division of labor and responsibilities in such words:

Oh for Christ's sake. I'm a businessman, and a fair man... We make an agreement. Then I keep my part of the agreement, and you keep your part of the agreement. I want this lot cleared by the morning. I want lions gone and all their shit shoveled up. (Norman, 1998, p.126)

On the other hand, despite their shared status of being subordinate, a hierarchy exists even among the lower class workers since “capitalist development creates the places for a hierarchy of workers” (Hartman, 1997, p.103). Thus, capitalist growth tends to create specific roles within the worker group. In *Circus Valentine*, Fred stands at the top of this hierarchy because he organizes the show, directs others, and manages finances. This gives him power over the rest. However, the way Fred and Reeves dominate those below them differs. This difference comes from their different views on work and what they expect from it. Fred's view of work reflects a collective perspective. As Hartsock notes, this kind of work is a reaction to the repetitive tasks and isolation often seen in capitalist workplaces. It is also a way to fight against monotony and competition (Hartsock, 1984). This form of work is based on shared beliefs and a sense of solidarity. It requires everyone to feel responsible for each other. Fred sees work as a group effort and feels a strong sense of duty towards others. His decision to pay for the twins' separation surgery shows his commitment to solidarity. His support for their operation is driven by his sense of responsibility. The twins show their loyalty as well. Fred realizes that they stayed because of his kindness. The twins tell him that staying together was their choice only because he was good to them. Fred refers to this mutual commitment as such:

I told the twins about the surgeon and asked them what they thought. They said the only reason they were staying together was because of me. Because I never laughed at them. They stayed together all this time because of us. (Norman, 1998, p. 156)

From another point of view, Fred's concern for the twins' well-being is similar to Marx's idea of a “social relationship” in work which is described as “the cooperation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what manner and to what end” (Marx and Engels, 1968, p. 39). Their mutual support showcases how their relationships thrive on cooperation and social bonds.

### **American Family Traditions**

Meanwhile, the shared sense of solidarity and teamwork among circus members has roots in American family traditions. These family ties were important not just for emotional reasons but also for the support and help they provided to the whole family. In this tradition, home was a place where family life and work combined, helping to keep production going. For circus workers, their home is also their workplace, since they live inside the tent where they perform. Hartman notes that in capitalist patriarchal societies, the household is defined as an “income pooling unit” where different family members' interests are unified around a common goal of producing and sharing resources. The family is seen not only as a group driven by feelings or kinship but also as a space where different activities and interests sometimes clash. People use family structures in many ways—they turn to kin groups for jobs, to build unions, fight for community rights, buy homes, borrow cars, or share childcare. However, they do not act only as family members. Instead, they also belong to gender groups

with roles shaped by capitalism and patriarchy. Hartman explains that people often navigate these roles in complex ways (Hartman, 1984).

In *Circus Valentine*, the circus members form a large family. Most members are related, or at least connected in some way. Even those who are not blood relatives become part of this network. A kinship system helps maintain this bond. Each person in the circus contributes to making the show. Their work on stage is their form of labor. This system keeps the flow of work and resources moving within the household of the circus. This idea goes back to early American history. During the colonial period, family households often included more than just relatives. They welcomed lodgers, apprentices, servants, or even unrelated individuals. These households served many functions, not just housing a family. Houses were places where work and production happened. Hareven notes that having unrelated people in the home was common then (Hareven in Luedtke, 1988). This situation helps explain the presence of non-relatives like the Siamese twins and Leroy in *Circus Valentine*.

After the colonial period and during the time of industrial growth, families were still seen as work groups in the American kinship system. Traditional family ties continued to define the connection between families and their communities. Hareven explains that industrialization did not destroy these roles but changed how they were understood. In industrial towns, families still worked together as units. Relatives helped each other with tasks like finding jobs, moving, and housing. They supported each other as families shifted from rural life to urban work. Even when families migrated, their bonds stayed strong. The family provided social support, especially for newcomers. Hareven states that migration did not end traditional kinship ties. Instead, families used these ties to help each other adapt to new environments and ways of living. During the early days of industrialization, kinship ties remained vital for assistance and cooperation. Rural and city kin groups continued to help one another with mutual services. They played a key role in organizing migration, both within the country and from abroad. When immigrants arrived in American cities, they preferred to live near family members. These kinship ties kept neighborhoods connected and became important sources of help. This pattern has lasted among some ethnic groups as well (Hareven in Luedtke, 1988).

These experiences relate to the circus family in *Circus Valentine* because its members are originally from Russia. Besides their Russian background, this circus family is also part of an ethnic and minority group. In sociology, a minority is a group that has less power or influence. These groups often have fewer rights and are viewed as less deserving of power. They are also seen as having traits or characteristics that are considered inferior. Besides being an ethnic group, circus performers can also be seen as minorities; they “have unequal access to power, that are considered in some way unworthy of sharing power equally, and that are stigmatized in terms of assumed inferior traits or characteristics” (Mindel & Habenstein, 1976, p. 4-5). As such, they often find themselves in a subordinate position relative to those in control, like Reeves, who derogatorily refers to the circus performers as “a dozen gypsies” (Norman, 1998, p. 116). This term not only demeans them but also signifies their marginalization, reinforcing their status as a minority group lacking influence.

The experiences of the circus group since their arrival in America highlight their dual identity as both an ethnic family and a minority group. Their cohesion stems from shared ethnicity and class, influencing their behaviors and thought processes. Family loyalty remains one of their most important values. In connection with this family bond, relationships among family members, such as between spouses, parents and children, are built on mutual help and

support. These ties draw strength from the idea that family members have ongoing responsibilities and reciprocal relationships.

In addition to mutual support, the ethnic working-class family often views work as a family project. The work done by wives, children, and even other relatives is carefully organized around the family's collective goals. For the family involved in circus life, performing is seen as a traditional occupation that keeps the family united. It also provides different work opportunities within the family. Trina explains this by saying, "You can't just choose to be circus people. I was born into it. When you're born into it, you never have to worry about what you're going to do because it's always been what I know" (Norman, 1998, p. 123). Her words show how ethnic family traditions influence her choices and behavior. As Hareven points out, family plans sometimes take precedence over what is best for an individual. For example, parents may try to delay their children's marriages, especially daughters, to make sure they still have support as they grow older and leave the workforce. Marrying and choosing a partner are often decided as based on family needs rather than personal desire (Hareven in Luedtke, 1988).

Within her family, Trina is seen as part of the labor force both now and in the future. This understanding reflects a common trait of children in ethnic working-class families. Many children are raised to work early and they start contributing to the family's income sooner than laws require. They are seen as useful assets. Their work helps support the family now and promises to help in later years. Parents see raising children as an investment in future stability. Throughout the play, her parents and Eva push Trina to work hard and succeed in her career. Since they are part of a working-class, ethnic family, their expectations serve to protect their current labor force and their future social security. Therefore, Trina becomes a key part of the family's income and overall effort.

Along with Trina, Eva's and Goldie's position show how women serve as important workers in their families. Eva works as an aerialist; Goldie is both a cook and a fortune-teller; and Trina trains on the trapeze. All of them contribute to the circus's income, which is a part of their traditional family role. These women help keep the family financially afloat through their work and participation in the circus.

### **Significant Historical Incidents mentioned in Circus Valentine**

In the early 1800s, as industrialization grew, a 'cult of domesticity' appeared. This idea shaped women's roles, especially in middle-class American families. In the play *Circus Valentine*, Goldie seems to be influenced by this idea. However, she still holds onto the old values of her working-class background and ethnic family traditions. Hareven highlights that despite the shift toward domesticity, many working-class and ethnic families remained steadfast in their traditional lifestyles, nurturing a collective family ethos: "Despite the impact of the ideal of domesticity working class and ethnic families to a significant degree continued to adhere to the earlier ways of life and maintained a collective view of the family" (Hareven in Luedtke, 1988, p. 248- 249).

In many ethnic groups, family roles were seen as essential for survival. Goldie's marriage to Fred can be viewed as more than just a romantic relationship. It was a partnership based on practical needs. In the past, families saw marriage and parenthood as a way to work together and support each other. These bonds were driven by financial and social needs, not just love. As Hareven explains, "a collective view of family obligations was the very basis of survival in earlier time periods. From such a perspective marriage and parenthood were not

merely love relationships but partnerships and cooperations governed by the family's economic and social needs" (Hareven in Luedtke, 1988, p. 249).

As a matter of fact, Goldie's role in her family is shaped by the social and cultural history of American society. While industrialization brought about substantial shifts for many, working-class families faced unique challenges. As work and home became more separate after industrialization, the home was seen as a special place to escape from the outside world. During the early 1800s, many women were assigned mainly to the home, where they took pride in being housewives and mothers. Goldie keeps some of these traditional family traits as she works as a circus cook and helps to support her family. At the same time, she absorbs certain middle-class customs that reflect shifting societal norms.

At the start of the 20th century, many immigrants tried to Americanize. Many women of immigrant families especially embraced the ideals of the cult of domesticity. They adopted family habits like having fewer children, marrying at a young age, and making the family a more private place. They also pulled women and children out of work and directed them in the ways they spent money. Because of this influence, Goldie married Fred when she was just 19. She also kept her family small, having only one child, Trina, who is now grown up. In compliance with another feature of the Americanization process, she is withdrawn from the labor force and she is made to leave her job as an aerialist and a flier as soon as she gets married since she is to give birth to Trina. Besides, Goldie has a desire to use beautiful plates as well as to have a settled home which has its roots in the cult of domesticity reigning middle-class American familial life during that time. Actually, what Goldie experiences is an example of "cultural pluralism"—that is, "becoming American while at the same time retaining one's cultural heritage" (Mindel & Habenstein, 1976, p.1).

On the other hand, Trina's views are shaped more strongly by the Americanization process. She has spent her childhood and teenage years in America and absorbed its main values. In one part of the play, she talks about her dream of a typical middle-class family. She imagines herself going to college. Her father might own a deep-sea boat and take tourists fishing. He might even become a TV anchor. Yet, Goldie's reaction to this dream is significant. She tells Trina that they are not normal, and they should be proud of that: "You wish we were normal people. Well, we're not normal and you should be proud of it" (Norman, 1998, p. 129). This response reinforces Trina's connection to her ethnic roots and encourages her to value her heritage over conforming to mainstream American ideals.

In Goldie's personality, Norman mentions another important historical event linked to the feminist movement: The Suffrage Movement and what followed. By the early 1900s, women's suffrage had become the main goal for many women's groups. These groups often met in clubs or societies focused on missions. For them, getting the right to vote was not just about equality under the law. It was also seen as a key step toward social change, cleaning up government, and making morality a priority for leaders. People believed that securing voting rights would change society and help women gain equal standing. The movement also aimed to bring women with different political views together. More than just voting, suffrage became a symbol of the power and hope women longed for. Achieving the vote would lead to fair pay, help reduce prostitution, better the lives of working women, reform prisons, and support single mothers facing hardship. Some groups like "revolutionary socialist minority saw the vote as merely a necessary reform on the way to the social ownership and control of the means of production" (Rowbotham, 1977, p. 82). Especially for the socialist minorities, the vote was only one step toward bigger changes, like shared control of factories and resources. To reach their goals, suffragettes sometimes used violent and militant methods.

They didn't hesitate to damage property or break windows as a form of protest. They wanted the public to support their fight to get the vote. These tactics led many to see them as a secret, underground group that believed actions spoke louder than words, aimed mostly at dividing the male ruling class. Later, the suffragette movement joined forces with workers and socialist groups, driven by the large strikes and unrest in industry. Some workers, many of whom had never protested before, started to form unions. They wanted their voices heard and their problems solved. They staged strikes and protests to push for their rights, seeking to make their needs known on a bigger stage.

In *Circus Valentine*, Goldie's attitude toward her boss Reeves while defending her rights reflects the same spirit as the suffragettes' stance against authorities. Her expectations from Reeves and her determined attitude mirror those of the suffragettes: "Now, if you're so in charge, you owe us security, and bathrooms... If you make us use the ones inside, we steal the toilet paper and write on the walls" (Norman, 1998, p. 125- 126). As the play nears its end, Goldie's rising anger leads her to become more aggressive and rebellious. Her provocative actions and defiance toward Reeves are similar to the militant tactics used by the suffragettes in the fight for women's voting rights. Her outbursts are driven by her feeling of humiliation on stage, and they echo the more violent strategies that characterized some of the suffragettes' protests.

Throughout the play, there are also references to American history beyond the suffrage movement. For example, Fred's comparison of their work as clowns to farmers highlights the early days of industrialization when rural life was giving way to industry. He explains that their role is to make the audience laugh, just as farmers feed society: "Because it's our job. Because this is how it works. We are the clowns and they are the farmers, and if we make them laugh, they will feed us" (Norman, 1998, p. 137). In another scene, Fred's complaints after losing their jobs again take us back to America before widespread mechanization. He laments the loss of human workers to machines, comparing their unemployment to that age: "Dam television. Dam Ringling and spaceships. Dam electric corn poppers and Wild Kingdom and Zoos and damn me... I just wish it was 1910" (Norman, 1998, p. 158). This statement shows how technology replaced many human jobs during that time, and Fred's words highlight his frustration over the rapid change.

Another historical allusion is towards the end of the play after the circus group is thrown out of both the shopping center and their tent, which they have lost to Reeves. The considerations of continuing to make their performances at fairs, shopping centers or state parks, which are markers of big urban centers, are evocative of the "urban crisis" of 1960s when "urban construction workers constituted the largest group of unemployed" (Warner in Luedtke, 1987, p.114), and point to a parallelism between the circus group's unemployment and the unemployment problem of those times. The circus members' desperate endeavors to find space to make their performances remind the reader/audience of those desperate experiences as well.

### **Multiple Forms of Oppression in *Circus Valentine***

In *Circus Valentine*, the play illustrates how women experience multiple forms of oppression. Firstly, they are marginalized due to their working-class backgrounds and their affiliations with ethnic and minority groups. Throughout the narrative, the various manifestations of women's suffering are evident, but the underlying causes remain unchanged. The oppression of women is rooted in the institution of marriage and the roles assigned to them within it. Marriage serves as a mechanism to control women, particularly in relation to

the development and ownership of private property, which is predominantly held by men. This exclusion deprives women of their rights to own or share in property and wealth, rendering them economically and legally subordinate. Women are hindered from owning wealth or engaging in productive work, and their empowerment can only be reclaimed through participation in labor and property ownership. The significance of private property is underscored in the play through Fred's possession of the tent, which he acquired with money inherited from their father. This ownership drives Goldie's decision to marry him, as it symbolizes the independence that comes with property ownership.

*Circus Valentine* highlights another common form of oppression—men's control over women's work in capitalist societies, often through marriage. An example of this is seen in Goldie's relationship with Fred. Heidi I. Hartman explains this control clearly: patriarchy is based on men's dominance over women's labor. Men achieve this by keeping women away from key resources needed for work. Monogamous marriage is a recent and efficient way to keep women under control. It gives men power over women's access to resources, allowing them to control women's labor. This control often serves men's personal and sexual needs (Hartman, 1997).

In the play, marrying Goldie gave Fred the right to control her work, which forms the base of his power. Before marriage, Goldie was an aerialist like Eva, performing with her sister as the "Sparrow Sisters." After getting married, Goldie stopped being an aerialist and became the circus cook. By controlling her ability to work, Fred limited her access to resources that could help her succeed. If Goldie had stayed in her career, she could have become famous and successful. Fred's goal was to keep her focused on serving him, which he often requests: "Goldie. Baby me, Goldie. I need it" (Norman, 1998, p. 127). By controlling her labor, Fred also kept Goldie from advancing in her career as well. This shows how marriage can be used to limit a woman's independence and keep her under a man's control.

Goldie's job as a cook highlights her position in a low-status, low-paying role. Her work is controlled not only by family-based patriarchy, represented by Fred, but also by a broader industrial patriarchy, symbolized by Reeves. Hartman explains that this division of labor continues in the job market, where women often work in roles similar to those they performed at home—such as preparing food, cleaning, and caring for others. These jobs tend to be low-paying and have little prestige, which keeps patriarchal relations in place. The basis of this system shifts from family to the wage gap, but the power structure remains. Industrial patriarchy is maintained in various ways, including union contracts that set lower wages, fewer benefits, and fewer chances for women to advance. These policies are not just outdated ideas or sexist views; they serve to uphold the material foundation of the patriarchal system (Hartman, 1997).

Reeves's attitude toward Goldie throughout the play reflects how industrial patriarchy oppresses women. When Goldie asks for security, Reeves's refusal shows his dismissive attitude. He says, "I don't owe you anything but a place to park and I'm having second thoughts about that" (Norman, 1998, p.125). In other parts of the play, Reeves' denying women access to private bathrooms or turning off the power for aerialist women also point to how women face oppression under this system. These actions reveal how industrially-based patriarchy controls women's lives and limits their rights.

Traditional Marxism sees class as the best way to understand women's oppression. It argues that women should be viewed as part of the working class. Their main struggle is against capitalism, and this should take priority over conflicts between men and women.

Hartman emphasizes that conflicts based on sex should not weaken solidarity among workers. He states that women's issues are secondary to the broader class struggle: "Women should be understood as part of the working class; the working class' struggle against capitalism should take precedence over any conflict between men and women. Sex conflict must not be allowed to interfere with class solidarity" (Hartman, 1997, p. 112 -113).

However, even with this focus on class, capitalist societies show that the division of labor based on gender still oppresses women. This division of roles clearly shows that Traditional Marxism does not fully eliminate sex-based oppression. Hartsock explains that this oppression comes from the way labor is split between men and women in capitalism. She points out that women contribute both to paid work outside the home and to producing goods at home. Women sell their labor power and produce both products and surplus value like men do. They also produce things in the home that are meant for their own use. Unlike men, women's lives are often directed by their role in creating these in-home goods. This means that women work more than men overall. Many people recognize this as the "double-day," where women work extra hours both at work and at home (Hartman, 1997). Goldie's role in the circus shows these ideas in action. She works as a fortune-teller, contributing to the circus's labor. At the same time, she cooks and takes care of her children at home. In this way, she contributes both to the production of labor in the circus as the fortune-teller and to the production of use-values in the home as a cook and a mother. Her position proves how women often work more than others in the group. This extra work is a clear example of the "double-day" that these theories describe.

However, working in a low-paying job at the circus makes Goldie feel unhappy and disillusioned both financially and spiritually. Her role as a worker highlights the "employment boom" of the late 1960s and 1970s, a time when jobs did not lead to economic growth or social mobility, especially for women. Many women had job opportunities, but these jobs often kept them in poverty instead of helping them escape it. "Ironically, women's work frequently meant sinking deeper into the quagmire of marginal poverty instead of securing the liberation so much talked about in the media" (Chafe in Luedtke, 1987, p. 266 -267). Goldie, in *Circus Valentine*, also voices her frustration with the causes of her suffering. She vents her anger about her marriage, her job, her poverty, and her life overall, especially when speaking to Fred. She says, "I'm a middle-aged fortune-teller sick of cheap things. I'm tired of cheap, second-hand, discount, big plastic stuff! I want a house, a mailbox, neighbors. I want an inside telephone. I'm sorry about this" (Norman, 1998, p.148).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

*Circus Valentine* underlines the multifaceted oppression that not only impacts women but also extends to members of specific social classes and marginalized groups. The intersection of capitalism and patriarchy is central to their suffering, illuminating that women's liberation cannot occur in isolation from broader social struggles. A critical analysis of the play reveals how these intersecting forms of oppression work together to perpetuate cycles of disadvantage, particularly within ethnic and working-class communities.

From an analytical perspective, it is clear that understanding women's oppression requires an intersectional approach that recognizes the distinct but interconnected experiences dictated by race, class, gender, and cultural background. The characters in *Circus Valentine* exemplify how cultural materialism shapes their realities, wherein economic structures critically influence social relations and individual choices. These findings align with critical

feminist theory, which emphasizes the need for comprehensive frameworks that incorporate the lived experiences of diverse women to address societal inequities effectively.

Recommendations stemming from this analysis suggest that any movement aimed at combating oppression must unify various social struggles. A more inclusive approach to feminism is essential, advocating for policies and practices that foster collaboration between labor movements and feminist activism. Such alliances can amplify marginalized voices, ensuring that the socio-economic factors contributing to women's oppression are addressed. Additionally, educational initiatives should focus on raising awareness of intersectionality, encouraging future activists to integrate this understanding into their advocacy work.

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