

## **Challenging Patriarchy: Hermione's Role in Feminist Discourse and the Emergence of 'Suffragette Syndrome' in *Her***

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### **Abstract**

This research explores the multifaceted dynamics within feminist movements, with a particular focus on the 'suffragette syndrome', a concept coined by the author to encapsulate the intricate interplay of resistance and assimilation. Through textual analysis and qualitative research, the study delves into the character of Hermione in H.D.'s *Her*, portraying her as a microcosm of these feminist dynamics. The research incorporates critical theories such as Gramsci's hegemony, Althusser's interpellation, Foucault's power dynamics, and Butler's performativity to dissect Hermione's challenges against and eventual conformity to patriarchal norms. It sheds light on Hermione's journey from resistance to assimilation, embodying the 'suffragette syndrome'. This study not only advances our understanding of feminist movements and their complex interactions between resistance and accommodation but also prompts a reexamination of contemporary gender discourse. It emphasizes the need for integrating defiance in established structures for meaningful change. In doing so, this research enriches our perception of H.D.'s *Her* and contributes significantly to the ongoing discussion of gendered resistance in literature and gender studies.

**Keywords:** 'suffragette syndrome', feminist dynamics, gendered resistance, Hermione (Character)

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## 1. Introduction

H.D.'s evocative novel, *Her*, invites readers into a rich exploration of dissent and co-optation, artfully embedded within the intricate tapestry of societal norms and gendered power dynamics. At its core, this analysis revolves around a concept deeply rooted in history: the 'suffragette syndrome.' This term, coined to describe a phenomenon emerging in the wake of women's hard-fought battle for suffrage, portrays a scenario where gains made by women were co-opted by existing power structures, offering inadequate concessions and stifling further demands.

The 'suffragette syndrome' serves as a conceptual lens through which we scrutinize the assimilation and neutralization of dissent within the dominant system. Informed by Althusser's notion of "interpellation" (Althusser, 1971) and Foucault's insights into "self-surveillance and power dynamics" (Foucault, 1977), we delve into Hermione's narrative, interpreting her acts of resistance as intricate dialogues with deeply entrenched societal norms, constructed and perpetuated by Ideological State Apparatuses (Althusser, 1971).

Central to our inquiry is a pivotal research question: "By what means does the dominant system in H.D.'s *Her* dissolve and neutralize female dissent, and what are the ramifications of this for individual resisters and the broader liberation movement?" This question guides our exploration of the co-optation of resistance, offering a focused lens for our investigation.

Moreover, our exploration illuminates nuanced discourses within the narrative, dissecting the dynamic interplay among resistance, identity, and collective formation within the prevailing patriarchal framework. We aim for a nuanced comprehension of the delicate equilibrium between subversion and assimilation in female resistance as portrayed in H.D.'s narrative, navigating the reciprocal relationship between individual defiance, systemic transformation, and the formative influence of gendered power structures.

In this light, H.D.'s writing becomes a reflective window into inner struggles against patriarchal norms. Hermione's relationship with Fayne, her engagement with writing, and her decision to marry herself illustrate these struggles vividly. For instance, Hermione's declaration of self-marriage, using her grandmother's *trousseau* money, symbolizes her complex negotiation with societal norms: "Her homeward, her feet were winged with the winged god's sandal. Everything will be right. I'll get the money they said they'd give me for my *trousseau*" (H.D., 1981, p. 234). This act, interweaving resistance and accommodation, epitomizes the intricate dynamics of the 'suffragette syndrome' within the broader context of the women's movement and feminist discourse.

## 2. Body of Paper

### 2.1 Literature Review

Emerging from the thematic and theoretical foundations established in the introduction, this Literature Review embarks on a critical exploration of H.D.'s work, notably *Her*, illuminating

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the nuanced dialogues between the protagonist Hermione's acts of resistance and the patriarchal mechanisms of assimilation. Crucially, anchoring H.D.'s literary endeavors and stylistic peculiarities within the feminist movement offers a pivotal contextual lens, elucidating the thematic and stylistic subtleties that will be dissected in the ensuing analytical sections.

H.D.'s enigmatic position within both the Imagist movement and feminist writing manifests a layered literary identity that navigates through, and occasionally rebels against, societal and literary norms of her era. Her work, celebrated for its innovative and audacious qualities, has navigated through a sea of complexities and reinterpretations within the literary landscape. This journey was particularly marked during her interactions with male contemporaries, such as Ezra Pound, whose influence exemplifies the challenges she faced within the male-dominated literary establishment. These interactions often reflected broader patriarchal mechanisms that sought to neutralize feminine power and agency in the literary world. A notable instance of this dynamic is how her male contemporaries, including Pound, attempted to obscure her female authorship. They aimed to make her work "pass' as male writing," as evidenced by the use of her gender-neutral pen name, H.D, an approach intended to prevent her writing from drawing attention to itself as being authored by a woman, thereby conforming to the gender biases of the time (Benstock, 1986, p. 333).

## 2.2 Analysis of *Her*

In *Her*, H.D. employs her unique narrative style to portray the struggles of women within a patriarchal society, using the character of Hermione as a lens through which to explore these dynamics. Her resistance to the male modernist strategies that initially marginalized her work within a proprietary modernism, perceived as masculine, demonstrates her determination to transcend constraints and explore new artistic avenues.

Furthermore, H.D.'s literary journey was notably influenced by thinkers like Freud and Pound, whom she saw as embodiments of a scientific-patriarchal rigidity that constrained women's potential (2003). Her work, including *Her*, emerges as a vehicle for challenging such constraints and promoting feminist ideals. This deliberate engagement with feminist thought and her critique of patriarchal structures within her narrative positions H.D. as a vital figure in modernist literature and feminist studies (Maclure, 2010, p. 2).

Hermione's interactions, her transformative turn to writing, and her ultimate act of self-marriage represent acts of resistance against the patriarchal system. However, the narrative also underscores the complexity of resistance. Hermione's self-marriage, seemingly defiant, can also be viewed as a form of accommodation within the system. This nuanced exploration of resistance and its complexities in H.D.'s works, both in poetry and prose, challenges patriarchal norms and encourages feminist interpretations (Maclure, 2010, p. 2). In conclusion, H.D.'s intricate relationship with literary movements, her audacious stylistic choices, and her unwavering commitment to feminist ideals all contribute to her significance within modernist literature and feminist scholarship. Her work serves as a powerful vehicle for challenging

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established norms, and her exploration of resistance within *Her* resonates as a compelling facet of her literary legacy.

## 2.2.1 Hermione's Narrative of Paradigm-Shifting Resistance

In this section, we embark on a profound exploration of Hermione's character and her unwavering resistance against the constraints of societal norms, taking inspiration from Foucault's insights into the power dynamics surrounding sexuality. Hermione's story serves as a powerful lens through which to examine the complexities of defiance and the negotiation of autonomy within a patriarchal world.

## 2.2.2 The Quest for Identity and Dissent

Hermione's narrative in *Her* encapsulates a profound quest for identity and a determined spirit of dissent against the rigid confines of societal norms. Her journey of seductive resistance, a rich and layered concept, is fueled by an ardent desire to transcend the preordained roles for women, symbolizing her yearning for autonomy within a patriarchal world. This seductive resistance is not merely about defiance; it encapsulates her ability to attract and persuade others through her compelling personality and ideas. Hermione employs her strategic use of charismatic presence as a tool to challenge and redefine societal expectations. This multifaceted approach to resistance adds a significant dimension to her struggle for autonomy and identity, as she navigates and reshapes the patriarchal framework around her.

In embodying this resistance, Hermione rejects conventional narratives, as seen in her relationship with Fayne and her aspirations as a writer.<sup>1</sup> This defiance is poignantly illustrated when she challenges the normative expectations of her mother, Eugenia, and the broader societal norms: “rejecting heteronormative romance and reimagining love through Fayne as a means of resisting her mother Eugenia and normative attraction” (Fountoulakis, 2023, pp. 56-62).

In this context, Hermione's quest echoes the ideas of both Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. Foucault, in his exploration of power and sexuality, asserts that sexuality is a battleground within society. This is mirrored in Hermione's struggle against societal labels, as she confronts the diagnosis of “dementia” imposed upon her, reflecting the internalization of hegemonic discourse even in acts of dissent: her resistance leads to somatic and psychological side-effects, diagnosed as “dementia” (H.D., 1981, p. 3).

Additionally, Hermione's defiance aligns with Judith Butler's theory of performativity, signifying her refusal to be defined solely in relation to a man. Her determination to explore alternative paths for identity and fulfillment is emphasized in her aspiration to write her own narrative; her passion for writing becomes a powerful force, allowing her to sublimate her rejection of the traditional heterosexual narrative (Fountoulakis, 2023, pp. 56-62).

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<sup>1</sup> For further exploration on Hermione's relationship with Fayne and her defiance of heteronormative romance as it relates to her struggle against patriarchal norms, see more in M.S. Fountoulakis's PhD dissertation (Fountoulakis, 2021).

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This act of writing not only serves as a form of resistance but also as a means of contending with societal expectations and her own inner conflicts. Hermione's evolving understanding that "love is writing" (H.D., 1981, p. 135) represents a crucial juncture. As she engages in the act of writing, she engages in an internal struggle, contending with her inner demons and societal expectations. Her journey through these struggles underlines her complex engagement with identity and dissent within the patriarchal system.

### **2.2.3 The Liberating Power of Love**

Amid Hermione's pursuit of identity and resistance against societal norms, an unexpected source of liberation emerges—her profound relationship with Fayne. Their connection serves as a potent catalyst for her dissent, infusing her life with a newfound sense of freedom and self-expression. This bond challenges societal norms, offering a counter-narrative to the reductionist gaze, a concept explored by Mulvey (1975), and cultural labels that have persistently diminished Hermione and Fayne to mere objects.

Their relationship presents a direct challenge to the homogeneity enforced by a culture resembling a panoptic prison, where individuals are treated as identical reflections of one another. This notion is reflective of Foucault's insights into how surveillance and power dynamics shape individual behavior (Foucault, 1977). Hermione and Fayne's connection liberates them from the constraints imposed by the social indoctrination process known as "hailing," a concept articulated by Althusser (1971). This process interpellates individuals as objects of others' gazes, coercing their acceptance and perpetuation of the dominant ideology of their culture while assigning labels that confine and define them.

Hermione's relationship with Fayne embodies the subversion of these oppressive structures. Through their connection, they dismantle the reductionist gaze and cultural constraints, embracing their true identities beyond societal labels. In doing so, they disrupt the hegemonic order, seeking independence, self-expression, and the freedom to shape their own destinies.

Within the crucible of their profound connection, Hermione's dissent flourishes, embodying the transformative power that can emerge from the most unforeseen of relationships. Fayne transcends the role of merely a lover, evolving into a co-conspirator in resistance, as together they chart a course through the stormy seas of societal norms. The emancipatory strength of their bond stands as a powerful affirmation of the resilient human spirit, a spirit that relentlessly strives to break the shackles of conventionality and fully embrace the vastness of human experience. This dynamic interplay of love and resistance resonates deeply with Kristeva's exploration of the potential for transformation within the realms of the symbolic and the semiotic, illustrating how personal connections can become a fulcrum for challenging and reshaping societal constructs (Kristeva, 1998, p. 134).

### **2.3 Assimilation and the Erosion of Dissent**

In the trajectory of Hermione's character development within *Her*, a gradual transformation of her unwavering resistance begins to surface, revealing a nuanced interplay between defiance and accommodation. Notably, her unconventional decision to marry herself, while it departs



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from traditional norms, signifies a form of compromise. This complex dynamic is captured in her evolving understanding that “love is writing” (H.D., 1981, p. 135), illustrating a crucial shift in her perspective.

Although Hermione's initial resistance was unwavering, we notice subtle fractures in her determination over time.<sup>2</sup> It becomes clear that she becomes more open to reconciling with societal expectations she once rejected. Hermione's contemplation of her conversation with Fayne brings a profound shift in her self-perception: “People like you and me here in the *États-Unis*” (H.D., 1981, p. 218), signifying a departure from the constraints of a singular linguistic perspective and an overcoming of divisive forces.

Some scholars argue that Hermione's self-marriage should be perceived as a strategic maneuver—a deliberate attempt to navigate the fine line between rebellion and societal acceptance. This perspective is reflected in Hermione's own words: “Run, run, run, Hermione... for yourself and Fayne Rabb” (H.D., 1981, p. 220), underscoring her recognition of Fayne's pivotal role in her life and marking a newfound resolve.

Additionally, Hermione's internal struggle becomes apparent as she embraces the role of a messenger in her visionary dream of rebirth. In this dream, she sees herself as a runner, clutching a hieroglyphic script, and invokes a divine connection to the god Ram, whom she addresses as “father” (H.D., 1998, p. 31). Critics contend that this symbolism suggests a surrender to the conventional narrative, as she embraces a role that aligns more closely with societal expectations. However, it's worth considering that Hermione's embrace of these symbols may not necessarily signify complete assimilation but rather a strategic engagement with dominant narratives to further her own agenda.

The ambiguity surrounding Hermione's evolving stance prompts a profound reflection on the nature of resistance and the intricate ways in which individuals navigate the turbulent waters of dissent. It underscores the challenges inherent in maintaining unwavering rebellion against entrenched systems, all while acknowledging the allure of assimilation. This complexity is further exemplified in Hermione's narrative journey, a struggle between resistance and assimilation, where her eventual alignment with the symbolic realm underscores a complex interplay of dissent and conformity (Butler, 1990).

Hermione's visionary dream in *Her*, symbolizing her internalization of hegemonic ideals and apparent submission to conventional narratives, is a critical juncture in her narrative. Envisioning herself as a runner clutching a hieroglyphic script, this dream represents her path toward “rebirth,” celebrated in H.D.'s “The Walls Do Not Fall” (H.D., 1998, 31). Interpretations of this dream diverge, with some viewing it as an aspiration for transformation and embracing societal expectations, evident in her poetic address to the god Ram: “Now my right hand, now

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<sup>2</sup> In his research paper, *Under the Panoptic Gaze of the Trans-historical Polis: Sylvia Plath's Esther and Sophocles' Antigone Amidst Shifting Sands* (2017), Michail St. Fountoulakis explores how the concept of self-liberation plays a role in today's society. He discusses its significance in the evolution of human social dynamics and the quest for personal freedom within societal frameworks. Additionally, he examines how the internalization of the ‘suffragette syndrome’ influences these aspects.

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my left hand clutch your fleece; take me home, ... let your teeth devour me, let me be warm in your belly, ... the re-born Sun" (H.D., 1998, p.31).

Others, however, see her invocation of Ram as a father figure not as a sign of assimilation but as a subversive act to challenge patriarchal narratives. This dilemma underscores the complex nature of dissent and assimilation, reflecting the blurred lines between rebellion and conformity. Hermione's dream symbolizes the alluring power of societal norms and their influence on those resisting them.

## 2.4 The Broader Implications of Resistance and Assimilation

Hermione's initial fervent dissent against societal norms evolves into a nuanced encounter with assimilation, leaving an indelible mark on her identity. Her decision to marry herself, indicative of both reconciliation with societal expectations and refusal to conform to traditional gender roles, symbolizes her defiance and willingness to navigate societal norms. Despite the ambiguity surrounding her submission, Hermione's dream of transformation and merging with Ram illustrates her enduring desire for autonomy and self-discovery (H.D., 1981, 31).

Hermione's journey in *Her* resonates with Gramsci's concept of hegemony, reflecting the struggles of those challenging societal norms (Gramsci, 1980). Her relationship with Fayne, transcending conventional boundaries, echoes Gramsci's ideas on cultural hegemony and societal power structures (1975). Within Butler's framework, Hermione's evolution, including her aspiration to write and her realization that "love is writing," challenges the patriarchal binary framework, signifying a profound shift in self-perception (H.D., 1981, p. 135; Bollobás, 2010, p. 132).

This narrative complexity in *Her*, particularly Hermione's rebirth dilemma and her negotiation with the symbolic realm, as exemplified in "The Walls Do Not Fall," highlights the transformative potential inherent in acts of dissent and the intricacies of confronting deep-rooted societal structures (H.D., 1998, p. 31). Hermione's story serves as a powerful commentary on the nature of resistance and accommodation within a societal framework deeply influenced by hegemonic ideologies, offering profound insights into the transformative power of rebellion and the complexities of resistance and assimilation.

In conclusion, H.D. crafts a narrative that deftly navigates the intricate dance of defiance and conformity within ideological landscapes. Hermione's journey, rich in themes of dissent, assimilation, and their enduring legacies, stands as a testament to the transformative impact of individual acts of resistance on broader societal transformations.

## 3. Conclusion

In *Her*, H.D. intricately weaves Hermione's journey as a nuanced exploration of the interplay between resistance and assimilation within the context of patriarchal discourse. Her narrative, initially marked by a definitive stance of resistance, evolves to address the complexities and subtleties of assimilation. This evolution is not just a personal transformation but also a

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commentary on the broader societal dynamics of gender, power, and identity. Hermione's development from a figure of seductive resistance to one who contemplates the implications of her assimilation reflects a deep engagement with the challenges of confronting and negotiating societal norms.

The narrative arc of Hermione, rich in themes of dissent, adaptation, and legacy, serves as a critical lens through which to examine the dynamics of cultural resistance and adaptation. Her story, extending beyond personal struggle, symbolizes the broader human experience within the confines of societal pressures. It underscores the transformative potential of individual acts of dissent and the enduring impact these acts have on the fabric of societal change. Hermione's journey, characterized by a shift from radical dissent to a nuanced reconciliation with prevailing norms, mirrors the intricate process of identity formation under the weight of patriarchal hegemony (Kristeva, 1980).

Thus, Hermione's narrative in *Her* transcends the scope of a singular character study, offering profound insights into the nature of resistance and accommodation within a societal framework deeply influenced by hegemonic ideologies. It highlights the significant role of individual narratives in understanding and navigating the complexities of gender, power, and resistance, echoing the intricate dance of defiance and conformity within and beyond the ideological landscapes of her time.



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