

Marriage, Family and Power:

A Comparison of Baldwin's and Gurnah's Depiction of Gender Norms

Introduction

Jennifer Hasty, contributor to *Introduction to Anthropology*, defines patriarchy as “a widespread gender ideology that positions men as rulers of private and public life” (Hasty et al. 2022, 12.2). In the context of domestic spheres, “the eldest male is recognized as head of the family, organizing the activities of dependent women and children” (12.2). The norm assumes men as dominant in the household, and women to be subservient and have children for their husband. Family structure is a primary avenue for the patriarchy to function. Though Hasty et al. define family broadly as “two or more people in an adaptable social and economic alliance that involves kinship” (11.2), the dominant ideology surrounding gender restricts what is, and is not, considered a family in modern Western society.

These can often exist at odds with one another, especially for men and women who are unable to fit within these norms. In James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, David, a gay man engaged to a woman named Hella, is living in France while Hella is in Spain. During this time, he has a relationship with a bartender named Giovanni, which transforms David's sense of self. Once Hella realizes what happened upon returning to him, she laments about how this alters not only his, but her position as well under the patriarchy. *Theft*, on the other hand, depicts an initially loving relationship between the both career-oriented Karim and Fauzia in 1990s Tanzania. Once Fauzia gives birth to Nasra, their infant daughter, their relationship is strained as Karim begins to resent her. He eventually has an affair with Jerry, a European woman, and leaves Fauzia altogether to focus on his career. In both of these novels, these characters are swayed by the patriarchal ideals of family and relationships, leaving each of them at a disadvantage.

In this analysis I will discuss the similarities and differences between these characters' relationship dynamics, as well as their outcomes through the lenses of patriarchy and family. Both Karim and David are influenced by societal pressure towards marriage and family; they both find relationships outside of their primary partners as a means of escaping the social norms that hold them back. Fauzia and Hella, on the other hand, are disadvantaged by these men's actions, and are more severely pressured by their respective societies to fit within the social categories expected of women. The experiences of these characters differ along the lines of culture and nationality, as well as sexual orientation. However, both illustrate the paradox of the patriarchal demand for women to be dependent on men, while men are expected to be independent from women.

Men and Family Structure

The male protagonists in each of the novels are affected by their respective cultures' views of marriage and children within the family, which in turn negatively affects their relationships with women. David's internalized heteronormativity results in him proposing to Hella "to give [himself] something to be moored to" (Baldwin 1956, 5). Even though he knows he will only be satisfied with a relationship with a man, he still finds himself unable to realize such a life because of the expectation of heterosexual marriage. It is in this way that he forces himself into an unwanted betrothal; he is not only mooring himself to Hella, but also to the standards of masculinity which demand that men be attracted to women.

These standards are not entirely abstract, either; the people David meets in France spell out these expectations for him. As he prepares to leave his temporary home, the caretaker from across the street leaves him with the advice to "go and find yourself another woman, a *good*

woman, and get married, and have babies. *Yes, that is what you ought to do*" (68). The caretaker puts these societal demands that are the source of David's internal conflict in plain words: he is expected to marry and have children with a woman. She specifies that he should be with a "good" woman, as her idea of Hella, who is not currently living with him, is still not up to the standard of who men are supposed to partner with. *Introduction to Anthropology* explains the gender norm that she is implying; in unequal societies, women are "relegated to the home as housekeepers and mothers" (Hasty et al., 2022, 12.2). Having a life outside of the household is looked down upon in women. Men such as David are questioned less for *their* own independence and instead expected to be with a woman entirely dependent on them. It adds an extra layer onto the already false narrative David is creating for himself by being with Hella. His attempt to moor himself through marriage is still not enough to become what those around him insist for men to be.

In contrast to David, Karim is seemingly in love with Fauzia when they marry, and he genuinely wants children. The dynamic between them after having a baby, however, changes Karim's attitude and makes him reconsider his relationship with himself and his manhood. In the setting of *Theft*, women's independence is generally seen as unusual. Badar, a young servant in Karim's household, finds a job at a resort hotel as he gets older. After checking in a European woman named Maria Caffrey, and she insists on carrying her luggage herself, "Badar wondered if there was something valuable inside it or if her brusque rebuff of his assistance was a habit of self-reliance, or maybe just impatience" (Gurnah 2025, 217). Within Badar's culture, such autonomy among women is not seen as commonplace. While Badar views this in a somewhat disdainful manner at first, Karim ultimately takes another foreign woman's self-reliance as an opportunity to distance himself from Fauzia and Nasra.

Although Karim is initially joyous at the prospect of children, it takes the responsibilities that come with raising Nasra for him to heavily reconsider how he relates to societal demands surrounding men's role in the family. Gurnah specifies that Karim "hated, yes, hated, the way she used the baby to shield herself from him" (250)." He had intended to be the head of the family and have control over Fauzia and Nasra, as the patriarchy expects, according to Hasty. However, Fauzia inevitably being much more busy causes them to instead grow distant. Karim wants to uphold the demand of their culture to have a child, but is unprepared for the responsibilities that come with it. This subversion of his own expectations emphasizes the contrast between family as an ideal as opposed to family as a beneficial structure. The ideal of a family omits the difficulty and responsibility that comes with bringing a new life into the household, and centers around women submitting to their husband. Karim views being a man within a family as having authority over a woman while simultaneously being independent of her, thereby giving little thought to Fauzia being left alone to take care of their baby.

Masculinity and Femininity Under Patriarchy

The influence of the patriarchy does not stop at familial roles; the system creates generalized ideas of manhood and womanhood that can shape both men's and women's sense of self, which they take into all aspects of their lives. Outside of the home, men are defined by their careers, and are intended to prioritize their professional lives. In *Theft*, Badar points out this dynamic between Karim and Fauzia after learning of Karim's affair with Jerry. Badar notices that "with each passing achievement at work he was growing more distant and preoccupied, [Karim] was growing into a proper man" (279). Despite Fauzia's high academic and career achievements, Badar does not view *her* as more of a woman for them. Only Karim can fulfill the patriarchal

role assigned to his gender by having a promising life outside the home, while Fauzia cannot.

Hasty cites cultural anthropologist Daniel Jordan Smith by detailing masculinity as “[beginning] in childhood and [intensifying] in secondary school as boys learn ‘to love women and money’” (Hasty et al. 2022, 12.3). It is debatable whether boys are taught to love women as people or rather to love the social capital that they gain from their inherently higher position in the institution of marriage. However, Karim’s love for money takes precedence once being a father does not live up to his idea of manhood. While he is allowed, and even encouraged, to be independent to prove his masculinity, Fauzia does not have that privilege.

The flip side of this system is the expectation for women to rely on men while the men have their own autonomy. After Karim leaves her, Fauzia becomes sole caretaker of Nasra. After he forgets Nasra’s birthday, Fauzia realizes that “she had not been able to be for him what he wanted” (Gurnah 2025, 269). She goes on to wonder if he had even truly wanted to be a father, and blames herself for being “unable to reach him in his self-regard.” She realizes that while men can get a pass to self-reliance outside of fatherhood, women are unable to back out of being a mother, despite her and Karim’s similar ambitions. Karim has the choice between freedom and the commitment in raising a child; Fauzia is not allowed that same option. The patriarchy expects men to be fathers, but with much less responsibility than in the way it expects women to be mothers.

David is also heavily influenced by the idea of masculinity, though unlike Karim, he is self-conscious about what society demands of him. David internalizes this norm to the point of repression of his true self, specifically citing “manhood” as an ideal he could “lose” for his queerness (Baldwin 1956, 9). The idea of how men should behave is ingrained in David from a young age, and he believes that being his true self makes him less of a man. Knowing that he

will never be able to fit into the system, David hides his true self until it becomes second nature, though his inner turmoil is constant throughout the novel. His relationship with Hella, as well as other women throughout the novel, are the results of bargaining with himself in order to appease the threat of losing his masculine self. Though both him and Karim act in direct response to the model of masculinity, David's experience differs from Karim's because he is fundamentally unable to live up to the ideal of manhood. Karim is able to make conscious decisions on how he fits into the patriarchal standard, while David's sexuality is unwavering. The patriarchy's definition of manhood includes heteronormativity, an ideal that David does not have the option to choose in the way that Karim chooses his career.

Even though it is not Hella's fault David is not attracted to her, she bears the brunt of feeling unworthy for being unable to live up to gendered expectations. As she becomes desperate at his distance from her, she demands, "David, please let me be a woman. I don't care what you do to me. I don't care what it costs. I'll wear my hair long. I'll give up cigarettes, I'll throw away the books" (161). Hella is acutely aware that women are supposed to be subservient and bending to the will of men under patriarchal standards. When she says she wants to be a woman, she is not asking for autonomy; rather, she is willing to give up freedom in order to stay with him. Though *Giovanni's Room*, as well as *Theft*, primarily focus on standards of masculinity, Hella's reaction to David's distance highlights how the patriarchy unfairly places a heavy burden on women, leaving them more disadvantaged than their male counterparts. Hella is willing to completely submit to David in order to "be a woman" because femininity is synonymous with submission to men under a patriarchal system. The contrast in her and David's separate reckonings with gender norms emphasizes how femininity requires reliance on men, while masculinity prioritizes self-sufficiency.

Jerry vs. Giovanni

The relationships between each of these pairs of characters are especially comparable when each of the men introduce the women to their new affairs. When Karim introduces Jerry, his new love interest, to Fauzia, Fauzia initially welcomes her. While Karim is out on a walk with Fauzia, Nasra, and Jerry, all he can think is that “it felt good. They were both women he had bedded. He wondered if this was how it felt to have two wives. [...] He wanted Jerry again, and the urgency of it was distracting” (Gurnah 2025, 266). Karim takes pride in having been with two women at once, giving no thought to how it affects Fauzia or their child, who is right there with them. While Fauzia remains dependent on him, Karim is permitted to be completely independent from caring about her and introduce her to his affair as though Fauzia would not mind. Under these gender norms, “ownership” of women is seen as a symbol of power for men, while those same women do not possess that same power for themselves.

When David introduces Giovanni to Hella, she acts markedly more distant than Fauzia does to Jerry. David’s reaction to her aversion leaves him much more uneasy than Karim feels: “I felt her eyes. But she was not suspicious; she was only troubled” (Baldwin 1956, 131). David fears suspicion knowing that his relationship outside of his betrothal will not be seen as socially acceptable. Because of the heteronormative aspect of the patriarchy, David’s connection to Giovanni exists in contrast to the expectations of masculinity, while Karim’s relationship with Jerry affirms them. Given the ways David and Hella have reconciled with their own genders, David views his manhood as being at stake because he truly desires to be with a man, while Hella sees her womanhood as being at stake because she is expected to be with a man. In both cases, the social capital gained or lost by both men and women is centered around men.

Conclusion

After reading and analyzing these two novels, it has become clear to me how seemingly arbitrary gender norms are. At first glance, it is easy to assume that gender roles are meaningless and assigned at random. However, it is important to understand why traits are associated with each side of the gender binary. The need for gender roles stems from “the European development of capitalism in the 1600s” (Hasty et al. 2022, 12.3), thereby making it a crucial building block of colonization and imperialism. The discrepancy between the men and women in Baldwin’s and Gurnah’s stories are representative of the power imbalance in colonizer and colonized cultures. The categories of masculinity and femininity are inherently unequal, overall benefiting men in the end and leaving women disadvantaged. Though, as we see with David especially, men can also suffer at the hands of the patriarchy. The same structure still demands more from women, though. Fauzia and Hella are both under more pressure to raise children after their male partners’ infidelity, while the men’s biggest concerns, especially David’s, are only related to themselves rather than real or potential children.

While David and Karim are both subject to societal pressure internally, the women are more affected externally; their position in society is unable to be separated from the men they are associated with. This puts men in power above women, as they have the freedom of self-reliance that women are not allowed. Each of these characters’ relationships shed light on the paradoxical nature of patriarchy: men achieve power through their autonomy to treat women however they choose. Meanwhile, women must also be reliant on those same men for whom it is acceptable to leave them as they see fit. Fauzia finds support in another man—Badar—while Hella laments about what this uneven playing field means for her as a woman. No matter how difficult it is for men to reckon with gender norms, as in David’s case, women will always be more disadvantaged under

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the system. To unlearn the demands of patriarchy, both men and women must explore their personal biases not only toward the opposite sex, but especially toward their own gendered positions within their society.

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