



The Stages of Male Oppression Towards Women in The Novel Women Talking by Miriam Toews

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Keywords: Male Oppression, Women Talking, Miriam Toews.</p> <p>DOI: http://doi.org/10.33005/jesscom.v2i1.17</p> <p>Submitted: 26 July 2025; Revised: 28 Agustus 2025; Accepted: 3 September 2025, Published: 3 September 2025,</p>	<p><i>Women Talking by Miriam Toews explores the oppression of women caused by male domination in a Mennonite colony in Bolivia. This oppression took the form of rape, where women were drugged with animal anesthetics. The purpose of this research is to examine male dominance and women's struggles against it as depicted in the novel Women Talking. The study employs a qualitative descriptive method in analyzing the data, using Diane Richardson's Theory of Sexuality and Male Dominance as the theoretical framework. The object of this research is Miriam Toews' novel Women Talking. The analysis reveals that the relationship between sexuality and male oppression lies in how men exert power over women in society, maintaining unequal power relations. In other words, sexual relations function as a mechanism of women's subordination while simultaneously preserving it. From this perspective, male-dominated sexuality restricts women in nearly all aspects of life. Power and dominance thus become the pillars of male sexuality, with men asserting masculinity and authority through sexual control. The findings of this research highlight two main responses: first, some women remain obedient and unwilling to leave; second, others resist and fight for independence, refusing to be constrained by an ideology of power that dominates the hearts and minds of society.</i></p>
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1. INTRODUCTION

Gender always determines the position of men and women, positioning men as leaders and women as followers (Kurin'in, 2013). This idea is rooted in the patriarchal system, where men have greater power, dominance, and privileges than women. The culture in each country has different characteristics; therefore, the characteristics of each person are influenced by the environment in which they live (Setyorini, 2016). In this study, male oppression is one of the main triggers for the exploitation of women, particularly in the form of rape. The link between male sexual dominance and female oppression is not new to feminism. Many 19th-century feminists were concerned about women's lives being controlled by "male lust" and sought to change sexual relations between women and men. They criticized the sexual double standard and highlighted how harmful sex could be to women, especially through its debilitating effects (Richardson, 1993). Women are considered inferior and secondary in the system that is created, which reinforces the hierarchical structure in which women are silenced and ignored in conveying their voices, views, and contributions (Pillado, 2023). The authority a person holds will inevitably influence others with the power they possess (Ihsan, 2016).

While the external environment places men and women in unequal positions, society places men as the dominant party, and societal regulations are one of the many limitations placed on women (Asri, 2023). To overcome the negative impacts of men oppression, it is necessary to carry out behaviors that threaten the patriarchal system, such as increasing women's abilities and strengths, building relationships based on justice, and fostering a spirit of courage (Zahra, 2023).

Women's struggles are also discussed and found in this study, a continuous and long struggle to achieve equality and justice. Throughout history, women have faced many challenges and obstacles that have hampered progress and limited their opportunities (Simamora, 2022). Women must continue to fight for their rights and gender equality. Through their struggles, women have shown that they can make changes and will not be silenced or restrained (Simamora, 2022). But most importantly, we need to continue to emphasize that women's struggles against male domination and female subordination must be strengthened and maintained (Richardson, 1993 p.20).

One of the most significant struggles for women in Miriam Toews' novel *Women Struggle* is their struggle for justice and equality. In this novel, patriarchal culture is still very strong and shackles women in everyday life. Women still experience low gender equality, which is caused by various factors such as rape of women who are not aware. This is due to the strong men oppression and is the main trigger for gender inequality. A person's personality is influenced by the environment with different characteristics (Ihsan, 2015)

This novel was chosen because it powerfully depicts real-world gender oppression through fiction. It is a finalist for the Governor General's Award and the Trillium Book Award and is on the long list for the International Dublin Literary Award (Gobonobo, 2022). Male characters dominate female characters in conversation and do not care about their partner's feelings. Even though the female character knows this, she is afraid to fight because of men oppression and her love for him (Delukman, 2023). Women can improve themselves in facing gender inequality driven by men. This shows that domination often occurs in women's lives and women are considered as objects. Even though women experience patriarchal domination, they can prove that women can work, are intellectual, reject injustice and are brave (Simamora, 2022). Based on the previous research above, the researchers discussed men oppression and women's struggles. Therefore, the focus of this study also analyzes men oppression and women's struggles. Furthermore, researchers focus more on women's struggles against domination in the form of rape by irresponsible men. This dominance is caused by the influence of culture that makes men the authority in a group.

The novel chosen explain many girls and women in a remote Mennonite colony in Bolivia called Manitoba Colony after the Canadian province woke up bruised and bloody from nighttime attacks between 2005 and 2009. The attacks came from ghosts and demons. Some

in the community believed the women suffered as punishment for their sins; many others believed they lied to get attention or to cover up adultery; and still others believed it was all the result of the women's wild fantasies. It was eventually revealed that eight men from the colony had knocked their victims unconscious and raped them with animal drugs. They were found guilty in a Bolivian court in 2011 and sentenced to long prison sentences. In 2013, while the men were still in prison, it was reported that similar assaults and other sexual abuse were continuing at the colony.

Based on the explanation above, the problem formulation in this research can be stated in the following research questions:

1. What is the male oppression depicted in the novel *Women Talking* by Miriam Toews?
2. How are the effects of male oppression portrayed in the novel *Women Talking* by Miriam Toews?

.Thus, this research wants to find the causes of male domination and women's struggles as depicted in the novel *Women Talking* by Miriam Toews.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design. The qualitative descriptive method, as explained by Stadtländer (2009), is used to examine literary works by interpreting and categorizing data in a descriptive manner. The aim is to understand the representation of male domination as depicted in the selected novel. In this context, data are analyzed based on Diane Richardson's (1993) *Sexuality and Male Dominance Theory*. The research focuses on identifying oppressive behavior and acts of rape toward women within the narrative, and how such domination triggers resistance and solidarity among women characters.

2.2 Participants

Since this study is a literary analysis, the participants are not human subjects but textual elements within the novel. The primary source of data is *Women Talking* (2018), a novel written by Miriam Toews, which consists of 160 pages. The novel serves as the main text from which relevant data are drawn. The sampling technique used is purposive sampling, focusing on narrative segments and dialogues that reflect male domination and women's resistance.

2.3 Instruments

The main instrument in this study is the researcher herself, who functions as the key instrument in qualitative research. The researcher reads and interprets the text to identify data related to oppression, rape, and resistance. A data sheet is also used to classify and record relevant quotations from the novel. The theoretical framework used to guide interpretation is Diane Richardson's *Sexuality and Male Dominance Theory*, which helps to frame and analyze the textual evidence.

2.4 Data Analysis Procedures

The data analysis process follows several systematic steps. First, the researcher reads and rereads the novel to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content. Second, data related to male domination—particularly in the forms of oppression and rape—are identified and categorized. Third, the identified data are analyzed using Diane Richardson's theoretical lens to explain how male dominance is portrayed. Finally, the analysis also focuses on how women respond to these acts of domination and how their struggle for freedom is depicted throughout the narrative.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Sub Findings

The findings of this study are derived from an in-depth textual analysis of Miriam Toews' novel *Women Talking*, focusing on how male domination is portrayed and its consequences for women in the Molotschna colony. The analysis employs Diane Richardson's (1993) *Sexuality and Male Dominance Theory* as the primary framework. The two main findings are categorized as follows:

a. Sexuality and Male Domination as the Cause of Rape

Sexuality and male dominance by Richardson (1993) states that Sexuality is the basis of male domination; considered the primary tool men use to control women and maintain their dominance over women in society as a whole. Many 19th-century feminists recognized that women's lives were controlled by "male desire" and sought to change the relationship between sexual relations between men and women. Richardson (1993) states This ensures that the female remains in place. Some people believe that this is a very important way for men to maintain control and power over women. But men must have responsibility to each of their families because it is natural to be the head of the family (Setyorini, Ihsan, Wahyuni, & Eka, 2022).

Between 2005 and 2009, in a remote Mennonite colony in Bolivia named Manitoba Colony, after the Canadian province, women in the Molotschna colony had been subjected to rape, which they called assault. This domination in the colony occurred because of not true, Peters as the leader apparently fabricated the attack with the statement that the incident was just a woman's wild imagination. This is proven by the statement below:

"Since 2005, in a remote Mennonite colony in Bolivia named the Manitoba Colony, after the province in Canada, many girls and women would wake in the morning feeling drowsy and in pain, their bodies bruised and bleeding, having been attacked in the night. The attacks were attributed to ghosts and demons. Some members of the community felt the women were being made to suffer by God or Satan as punishment for their sins; many accused the women of lying for attention or to cover up adultery; still others believed everything was the result of wild female imagination". (Toews, 2018 p.7)

The quotation above is reinforced by the fragment below:

"At first Peters told Mina it was Satan who was responsible for the attack, that it was punishment from God, that God was punishing the women for their sins. Then Peters told Mina she was making the attack up. He repeated the words "wild female imagination," with forceful punctuation after each of the words to create three short sentences." (Toews, 2018 p.52)

From the two quotations above, the issue of rape was finally revealed by Peters' words to Mina. So, it is very easy for Peters to make false statements that the entire community can believe. Whatever Peters said, people would believe it because it was a form of domination and power as the leader of the colony. Peters said the attack was punishment from God for the woman's sins. In reality, this rape was carried out by men in this colony who only fulfilled their desires and lust. This is consistent with Richardson (1993) statement that Feminists agree that men's economic and social power over women influences sexual relationships generally, women have less control over their sexual relationships than their male partners, and they are subject to double standards that favor men during sexual relations. What distinguishes feminists is that sexuality is very important in understanding women's oppression.

"Eventually, it was revealed that eight men from the colony had been using an animal anesthetic to knock their victims unconscious and rape them. In 2011, these men were convicted in a Bolivian court and received lengthy prison sentences. In 2013,

while the convicted men were still in jail, it was reported that similar assaults and other sexual abuses were continuing to take place in the colony.” (Toews, 2018 p.7)

Then from the quotation above, some of these women are forced to marry and have children even though they do not love their husbands. Women cannot fight because they already have a belief in the Bible that they must obey and submit to their husbands to have a place in heaven. Gender inequality does not affect women's sex lives, what is more important is how male dominated sexuality limits women in all aspects of their lives. (Richardson, 1993). Moreover, women are only considered as servants if in our economy they have low income (Mas'ulah, 2014). This can be seen from the following quotation

“And when the perpetrators return, the women of Molotschna will be given the opportunity to forgive these men, thus guaranteeing everyone's place in heaven. If the women don't forgive the men, says Peters, the women will have to leave the colony for the outside world, of which they know nothing. The women have very little time, only two days, to organize their response.” (Toews, 2018, p.16)

From the quotation above is strengthened with the quotation below:

“It has to do with the Biblical exhortation that women obey and submit to their husbands. How, if we are to remain good wives, she says, can we leave our men? Is it not disobedient to do so?” (Toews, 2018, p.120)

Based on the two quotations above, women are forced to obey all men's orders because it is stated in a verse in the Bible that this is their obligation. Despite this, men in the colony continued to carry out attacks continuously. Richardson (1993) emphasizes that sexuality is at the heart of male domination. This is seen as the main way men use to control women and maintain their power over women in society in general.

The men oppression that occurs in the Molotschna colony causes many attacks on women and even children in the colony. The men in the colony were very cruel and did not have the slightest compassion for abusing the women in the colony. This is proven by the statement below:

“Between 2005 and 2009, more than three hundred girls and women of Molotschna were made unconscious and attacked in their own beds. On average, an attack occurred every three or four days.”

“Nearly every female member of the Molotschna Colony has been violated by this group of eight, but most (except for the girls too young to understand these proceedings, and the women, led by Scarface Janz.”(Toews, 2018, p.22)

Then the woman is abused with a sedative which is supposedly given to animals, namely animal anesthetic. This rape was covered up by the local community and was only said to be a woman's wild imagination. They are even attacked every night at home. The attack was carried out by a man from Molotschna, and the perpetrators even included their own brothers. They do not hesitate to rape women just to fulfill their lust. Although the Bolivian Constitution guarantees equal rights for women and men, women in Bolivia face struggle and discrimination in some aspects of their lives.

“Since 2005, nearly every girl and woman has been raped by what many in the colony believed to be ghosts, or Satan, supposedly as punishment for their sins. The attacks occurred at night. As their families slept, the girls and women were made unconscious with a spray of the anesthetic used on our farm animals, made from the belladonna plant. The next morning, they would wake up in pain, groggy and often bleeding, and not understand why. Recently, the eight demons responsible for the attacks turned out to be real men from Molotschna, many of whom are the close relatives brothers, cousins, uncles, nephews of the women.” (Toews, 2018, p.15)

From the quotation above, it is proven by the quotation below:

“Miep herself is unaware of why she experiences pain in certain parts of her small body, or that she has a sexually transmitted illness. Nettie Gerbrandt, too, was attacked, possibly by her brother, and gave birth prematurely to a baby boy so tiny he fit into her shoe. He died hours after being born and Nettie smeared her bedroom walls with blood.” (Toews, 2018, p.43)

From the two quotations above, it can be seen that rapists do not look at age. Agata's three-year-old granddaughter Miep was abused by the men on two or perhaps three different occasions. Richardson (1993 p. 23) states that in terms of how much sexual relations affect or influence other social relations, there are significant differences regarding sexuality in reproductive patriarchal societies. This is caused by power conflicts in society. In other words, sexual relations both demonstrate women's subordination and reflect it. Men oppression is very clearly visible with the differences in position and treatment between men and women. They also do not hesitate to order women to do household work for the welfare of the colony. Despite this, Molotschna women are still considered and treated worse than animals. women are treated like animals without mercy. This is proven by the statement below:

“They will contribute to the well-being of the colony by tending to the chores, which are manifold now while the men are away, and which if abandoned for as little as one day will result in mayhem, especially when it comes to the milking and feeding of the animals” (Toews, 2018, p. 23)

The quotation above is reinforced by the quotation below:

“Greta Loewen sighs heavily. She says that although we may not be animals we have been treated worse than animals, and that in fact Molotschna animals are safer than Molotschna women, and better cared for” (Toews, 2018, p.39).

From the two quotations above, it can be seen from Greta's statement that the position of women in the colony is looked down upon. Even animals are nobler than women.

This novel by Miriam Toews is very significant with Richardson's theory that sexuality not only explains how our sexual desires and relationships are shaped by society, but also finds out how sexuality as it is currently constructed is related to the oppression of women. In this case, dominance and power are the pillars of modern male sexuality. By being sexual, men assert their identity as masculine and their status and power over others. This is an important method that maintains men oppression and control over women.

b. Effects of Male Dominance on Women's Autonomy

After the women held a meeting to discuss whether they would stay or fight. There are two opinions resulting from discussions from the Loewen and Friesen families.

1. Struggling to fight

Richardson (1993) women may also find it difficult to reject men because they fear the consequences: for example, threats, or actual violence, or their partner's rejection. Some voices stated that they did not want to leave because they did not know where they would move and just gave up. Because while living in Molotschna the women were not allowed to leave the colony.

“We won't have to leave. We won't have to pack. We won't have to figure out where we're going or experience the uncertainty of not knowing where we are going. (We don't have a map of any place.)” (Toews, 2018, p.49)

The quotation above is the result of choosing to stay afloat and is reinforced by the quote below:

“Autje and Neitje sway back and forth, a tug of war with the braid that connects them, but gently. Autje continues: We don't know where to go.”

“Neitje laughs. She adds: We don’t even know where we are!” (Toews, 2018, p.56)

From the two quotations above, it is evident that the elders and teenagers in Molotschna both do not know where their true homeland is and they are forced to choose to endure the oppression that will continue to occur in the Molotschna colony. That it does not rule out the possibility that people who have experienced sexual violence and harassment will forgive themselves. They also influence how we 'define, reject, cope with and survive their experiences' (Richardson, 1993, p. 25).

2. Struggling to leave

Some women have no choice but to abandon molotschna. They do not want to be restrained by evil ideologies that are allowed to dominate people's hearts and minds. This relationship not only reflects the power that men have over women in society in general, but also determines the unequal power relationship (Richardson, 1993, p. 30).

“Mariche quickly responds: It’s obvious: we’re fighting for our safety and for our freedom from attacks!” (Toews, 2018, p.50)

The quotation above is reinforced by the quotation below:

“Mariche opens her mouth, but Salome quickly interjects. Time will heal our heavy hearts, she states. Our freedom and safety are the ultimate goals, and it is men who prevent us from achieving those goals.” (Toews, 2018, p.58)

From the two quotes above, the women have planned to leave the colony because the real ultimate goal is to make its members more advanced and developed. If they remain in Molotschna forever they will be constrained by male power and will not know the world of good education and religion. Patriarchal practices usually arise in societies that maintain customs and culture that consider women as inferior. Cultures like this usually show men oppression in various aspects of life (Hajir, 2023).

“When the women have determined where they’re going and have established themselves and are thriving as a democratic/ collective/literate community (with progress reports made regularly on the rehabilitation/behaviour of the men and boys with regard to the women and girls)..” (Toews, 2018, p.62).

The quotation above is reinforced by the quotation below:

“She tosses off a few ideas: Men and women will make all decisions for the colony collectively. Women will be allowed to think. Girls will be taught to read and write. The schoolhouse must display a map of the world so that we can begin to understand our place in it. A new religion, extrapolated from the old but focused on love, will be created by the women of Molotschna.” (Toews, 2018, p.51)

From the two quotations above, it can be seen that women are already planning for a new, more developed and modern world. There are no more attacks and domination by men who have oppressed them. After long discussions, the Friesen family assured the members that by leaving Molotschna, they would not betray the principles of the colony. because if they persist they will not change and will become bad Mennonites.

“Pacifism, Agata says, is good. Any violence is unjustifiable. By staying in Molotschna, she says, we women would be betraying the central tenet of the Mennonite faith, which is pacifism, because by staying we would knowingly be placing ourselves in a direct collision course with violence, perpetrated by us or

against us. We would be inviting harm. We would be in a state of war. We would turn Molotschna into a battlefield. By staying in Molotschna we would be bad Mennonites. We would be sinners, according to our faith, and we would be denied entry to heaven..” (Toews, 2018, p. 86).

From the quotation above, the goal of getting out of Molotschna is very appropriate. Because by staying, the women will continue to feel continuous coercion. According to the rules of the colony, if they want to be good mennonites, they must separate men and women in dangerous conditions until they find their way back to the straight path.

3.2 Discussion

Based on the findings in Miriam Toews' novel *Women Talking* and the analysis using Diane Richardson's (1993) *Sexuality and Male Dominance* theory, it can be concluded that male domination in patriarchal societies not only affects social structures but also infiltrates women's personal and spiritual spaces. In the Molotschna colony, this domination is manifested through sexual violence, spiritual oppression, and the restriction of access to education and freedom of expression.

Richardson's theory explains that sexuality in patriarchal societies is not merely a biological relationship, but a tool of domination and control that men use over women. This is clearly evident in the novel, where women are forced to submit under the guise of religious teachings, and sexual violence is interpreted as divine punishment or dismissed as female imagination. The fact that the perpetrators are often brothers, uncles, or even fathers of the victims shows how deeply rooted this domination is in the family and community structure.

While Richardson highlights that sexual relationships mirror broader power relations in society, the novel demonstrates that this power not only results in physical violence but also erodes women's autonomy psychologically and socially. The women of Molotschna are left with only two difficult options: submission or escape, both of which carry significant risks. Fear of being ostracized, losing their homes, or even endangering their lives are strong reasons why some women choose to stay.

However, other women exhibit resistance against this domination. They aspire not only to escape the cycle of violence but also to imagine a new world—a world where women can think, make decisions together with men, gain access to education, and form a more humane religious system. This action shows that male domination can be confronted through collective solidarity and feminist consciousness.

This discussion also reveals that the forms of violence and domination depicted in the novel align closely with Richardson's theory, which asserts that sexuality is used to maintain male power structures. The experience of the women in Molotschna demonstrates how politicized sexuality becomes a primary tool of oppression, and how the removal of control over women's bodies and minds is a direct consequence of extreme patriarchy.

Thus, male domination in *Women Talking* not only affects women's bodies but also violates their basic human rights. The novel vividly portrays how women negotiate their agency through dialogue, spiritual reflection, and collective decisions to break away from oppressive systems. This is a concrete manifestation of Richardson's assertion that women's struggle to reclaim control over their bodies and lives is the most powerful way to resist male domination.

4. CONCLUSION

After analyzing *Women Struggle Facing Male Domination in The Novel "Women Talking by Miriam Toews"*, the author finds that sexuality does not only explain how their sexual desires and relationships are shaped by society, but also explains how sexuality as currently

constructed is related to the oppression of women. They will use unusual methods, such as raping women who are unconscious because they have been given animal anesthetics. In this case, power and dominance are the pillars of male sexuality. Men become sexual to demonstrate their status as masculine and their power over others. This is an important way in which men can control and dominate women. Therefore, in the end women will fight back against the oppression carried out by men. Some women will remain obedient and will not want to leave because throughout their lives they have not been allowed to go anywhere. But other women will come out and fight for independence and will not be constrained by evil ideologies that are allowed to dominate the hearts and minds of society.

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